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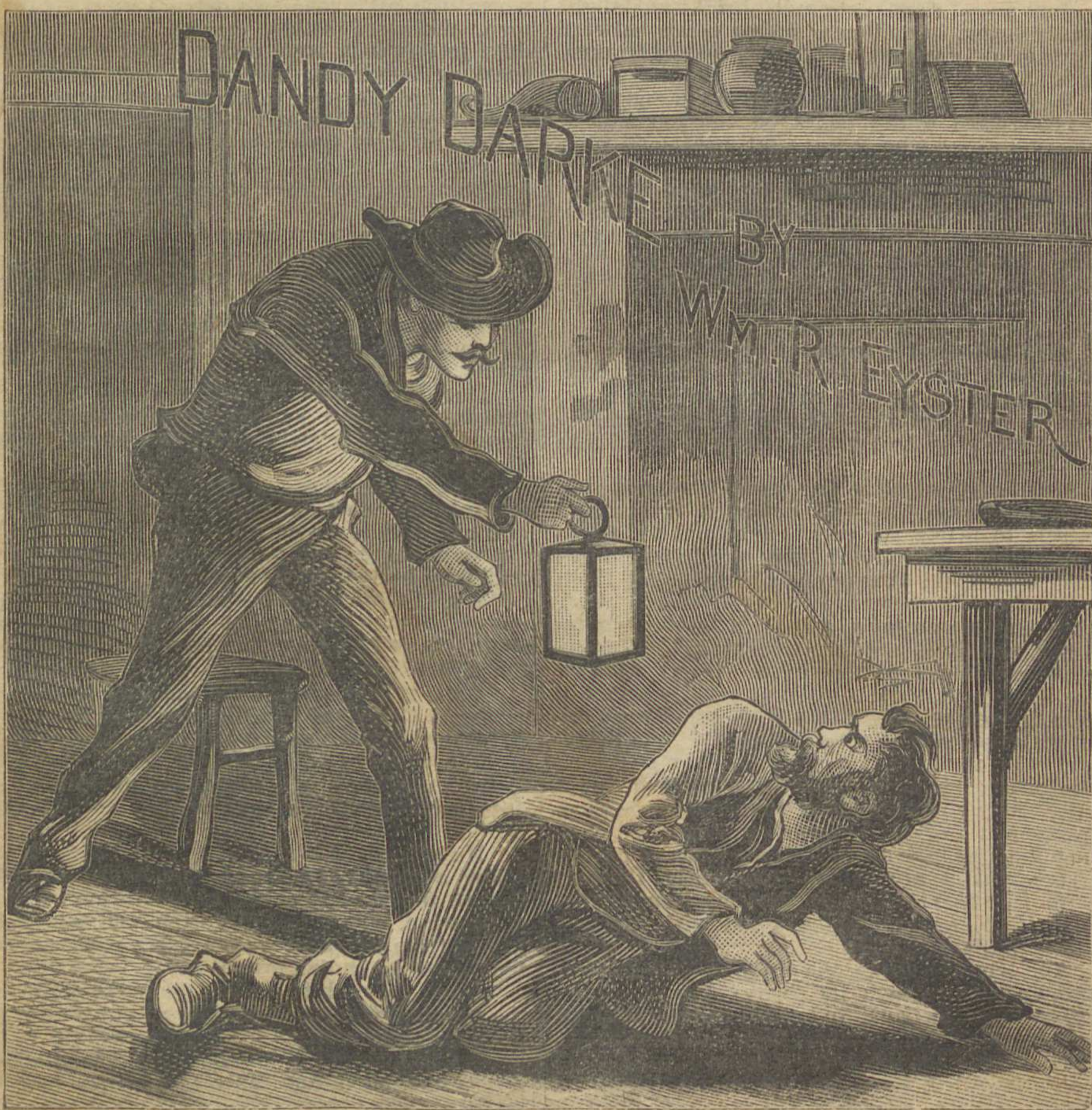
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HE HELD THE LANTERN DOWN AND RECOGNIZED THE VICTIM, WHOSE EYES JUST THEN OPENED
AND WERE FIXED UPON HIM.

Dandy Darke;

OR,

THE TIGERS OF HIGH PINE.

A Story of a Camp of Refuge.

BY WM. R. EYSTER.

CHAPTER I.

FUGITIVES FROM FATE.

THE river ran quietly along, fringed on either side by a thread of timber, which, here and there, protected by some change in the conformation of the land, swelled out into a little grove, of huge oak, tall hackberry, or cottonwood, or spreading elder.

Into one of these clumps the bright moonlight was peering, its radiance sifting down between curtaining branches, and falling upon a strange, a wild, a terrible scene.

Before we attempt to picture this scene let us go backward a few hours, to the moment of sunset and see who it was that went into camp in this lonely, though beautiful spot.

Just at that hazy, mazy hour, when the day is melting away into darkness, the creaking of wheels and the lowing of cattle, instinct with the approach to water, might have been heard, and over the brow of the ridge, or divide, that lay along the stream on the further side, there came a small caravan.

First appeared a mounted man, with carbine at a ready, and eyes peering this way and that. The way to the water's edge was safe and easy, and he rode straight down and without hesitation forded the stream, and tried the bank upon the other side.

"An excellent place for a camp," he muttered, "though none too well defended if we had reason to fear a surprise. But what have I to fear now? Certainly, if there are those to the east who would have pursued, I distanced them long ago. If there are savages to the west, their hunting-grounds still lie a hundred miles away, and it is not likely that they will penetrate to this spot, so near to the line of advancing settlement. For a night or two we can still camp in peace. After that we must beware, until we have leaped across the line of barbarism and reached the rule civilization that lies upon the other side. Oh, Nellie, Nellie, how can I ever repay you for all that your love of me has made you suffer? I cannot understand, even, how you can look me in the face when you know that my hands are stained—innocently, I swear! with the blood of those that are near to you! May Heaven aid me to teach you with my love to forget!"

And while he spoke, the wagons—two in number, and drawn each by three yokes of oxen—came down the bank, and rolled heavily into the water which was not more than hub-deep.

For a moment there was a scene of tangle and confusion, but soon, as the cattle began to drink eagerly, silence again reigned, the two drivers, from their perches at the forward ends of the wagons, glancing around to see the manner of the place in which they were to camp.

"I declar', Julius, ef de 'skeeters be so powahful bad—dey seems like so many youngstahs a-suckin' de sweet cidah frew a straw—dat I'se w'arin off ebry ton ob flesh on my bones a-fightin' ob 'em. Woah, haw, Mike! Come out o' dah, now!"

The whip of the driver cracked like a pistol as he spoke to the off ox in the lead of his team who responded to the call. The three yokes straightened their chains, and the wagon ground harshly and heavily over the gravelly bottom, and with a long, slow, steady pull was brought up the sharp bank, and taken to the spot indicated by the first comer, who quickly cast himself from his iron-gray steed and busied himself with unloading the little train.

There were but five persons actually of the party, which was headed by Mark Dorland. He was indeed the head, the life, the brain, the nerve, the all. The two drivers were colored men, who were faithful enough, and did their duty just as they were ordered; but they were speaking automata, and were scarcely to be counted upon for real work on the plains, though their strong muscles and willing hands would be in demand when they reached that land of golden promise which had been but lately opened up, and toward which Mark Dorland had turned his face.

For him the most precious freight in that well-fitted train was his own little family, consisting of but a wife and son, the latter a fine, manly little fellow, perhaps ten years of age. As he helped the two from the wagon, a great, love-full smile lit up the face of the husband and father.

"One day further on our way, my darling. One day more of a journey between those who should be our friends, and yet are my most deadly foes."

"Yes, Mark; one day further have we gone toward the heart of the wilderness. Heaven grant that there we may lose our identity, save for each other; and that the tigers upon your trail may be at fault forever."

"Ay, Heaven grant it—and I dare pray that prayer, though my hand be red with the blood that I swear I would rather have died than have taken, had I known it."

"Such words are not for the ears of one so young as Dane, and I would now that we could altogether forget the past and begin a new life."

"We will! we will!" and as Mark Dorland spoke in a tone of momentary exaltation, a deep, guttural voice almost at his elbow, chimed in:

"How!"

For a moment husband and wife started, though the word was one of salutation instead of question. They had forgotten, and wheeled, just as from the other wagon a face protruded—the face of an Indian brave.

"How? My white brother camps to-night by the running water. Good, Mato Luta is near to the hunting-grounds of his friends and will be a burden no longer. White man has done Scarlet Bear much good, and Mato Luta never forget. He keep Indian pappoose another night yet and the Bear bring Brave Horse, carry her away quick."

Even as he spoke the Indian glanced around

him, taking in every feature of the well-remembered spot.

"You have nothing to be so grateful for. I picked you and your little granddaughter up and carried you from one camping-ground to another. Who would not have done the same?"

"Umph! Indian go town of white man and have much trouble. Squaw die, pappoose sick, Indian shot by bad white man. Dying at stream. Good white man find red-man, dress wound, carry him three, four day, feed him all the time. Scarlet Bear never forget. No more trouble to white brother now. Leave little girl here, come back by and by, umph!"

The words of the two told the whole story. Though Mark Dorland would have had him stay he refused, but turning, stalked away with a gait that in a white man would have been slow and painful, but in him had a native dignity that concealed the effort that it cost him.

"Oh, Mark, are you sure that you can trust him?" exclaimed Miriam Dorland, as the form of Scarlet Bear was lost in the now gathering darkness.

"With my life. I have secured his eternal gratitude. And, as a hostage, see, he has left his little granddaughter. I know something of Indian nature. He will return for her with his friends, who, he has told me, are some twenty miles north of this. After that he and his tribe would defend us to the death."

Perhaps there was truth in what Mark Dorland said, but his wife drew their boy, little Dane, toward her with a shudder, and kissed him a dozen times.

"Oh, my darling boy, would that I could guess what dangers for the future lurk in your pathway! And yet you are too young to warn, too young to understand the perils that surround us now and may dog your footsteps through life. Heaven save you from sudden, violent death, is your mother's prayer."

"Amen!" chimed in Mark Dorland's strong but musical voice. "Now let your fears be forgotten. Julius is preparing our evening meal, and to-night, yet, I think we can slumber in peace."

Could they? Ah, Mark Dorland little dreamed of the story which that dingle, before morning, would have to tell.

CHAPTER II.

THE FALL OF THE AX.

FOR his age, Dane Dorland was a bright, handy, intelligent boy. He was thoughtful, too, for his years; though probably the circumstances of his life had made him so.

From the earliest period of his remembrance, his father had lived under a cloud, ever struggling to forget or evade the past.

Although his parents scarcely imagined it, he knew much of the story of their lives, having gathered it from fragments of conversations uttered in his hearing.

He knew, though perhaps he did not understand, that his father had won his mother and carried her away in defiance of the wishes of her family. That there had been an unfortunate collision in which either Mark Dorland or a friend had taken the life of Mrs. Dorland's brother, and that Malcolm Dane, a young man

of strong, unbridled passions, had recorded an oath to hunt down and shoot upon sight the one who had stolen his sister and slain his brother. And though years passed this hatred never slackened.

Yet through it all Mrs. Dorland had remained true to her husband, though she had many an hour of gloomy despair; and now accompanied him as he turned his steps toward the far-off mines, where he hoped to lose his identity and distance pursuit.

This night for a time, they sat around the dying embers of the camp-fire, while the two colored men watched the cattle that were luxuriating in the long grass of the river bottom.

Apart from the two elders and hidden effectually in the shade of the wagon, sat Dane Dorland, and close beside him was the little Indian child.

She had crawled there for company, but never uttered a word. So little had she spoken since she had been with the train, that possibly no one knew that she understood English at all.

Now she suddenly arose from the ground where she had been sitting, and whispered into the ear of the boy:

"Bad man come. Injun girl an' white boy hide, he no see um. Heap good, that."

Then she glided off into the darkness behind the wagons, and, impelled by a strange sensation, that seemed to be one of warning rather than fear, the boy followed her.

A moment later, there came the sound of blundering footsteps, carelessly approaching the spot. Then a voice hailed the camp through the darkness:

"Hillo, thar! Ahoy! I'll sw'ar I see'd a leetle light a-glimmerin' atwixt the trees, so yer needn't try to lay low. Bill Blake ain't afeard of no livin' catersnoogeous catermount; an' ther' ain't no honest man need be afeard of him. I say thar, camp, give us a hail, till I find ther bearin's, an' then I'm just rooster enough to flop right down to the camp-kittle an' grease my innards with the leavin's of the crowd. I'm 'most starved, I be; so play this ole hoss fair till he kin stren'then up his vittals."

The two watchers by the fire were at first obstinately silent, though Mark Dorland feared no one man. But when he realized that this man would not be likely to pass in the darkness, he gave an answering signal that soon brought the stranger, who called himself Bill Blake, to his side.

"Travelin', be yer, stranger?" was the salutation of the man, as with quick eye he made out the dim outline of the two wagons. "There's a powerful lot of wagons on the trail now, though they mostwise strikes it higher up. I reckon you kin give me a stake of grub. I've been on the tramp all day, an' 'll have to camp 'round hyer somewhars to-night."

Dorland gave the fire a stir and it burst into a blaze. By the light thus obtained, he had a view of the man, with whose looks he was not at all pleased, though he had seen many a more disreputable-looking character.

He was a stout, broad-shouldered man of perhaps thirty-five years of age, dressed in border fashion, and carrying conveniently to his hands a bristling array of weapons; at his back was

strapped a short carbine, in his belt were thrust a brace of pistols and a knife, while he carried a huge club, that would serve as a cane, or as a very convenient weapon.

"You've took my stock, pard, now give us an answer. I tell yer when a man don't treat me right I'm easy riled; an' it strikes me ye'r slow on the tongue, or mighty uncivil."

"I do not want to be uncivil, and I think I am as hospitable as most, but you know one has to look twice, out here, before he speaks once. Sit down and I will see what we can do for you. It shall never be said that any one was turned away hungry from my camp."

"Any one, stranger, does that mean friend or foe?"

"It does."

"Then I'll sw'ar you are white. Ef I spoke a leetle huffy a bit ago, I'll eat all that. Shake."

He extended his hand across the fire, and Mark Dorland gave a firm and steady grasp, then he turned and called to Julius, who came blundering in through the darkness.

"Here I is, masser; we's jist bin lettin' ther cattle graze 'round, but now we's lariating 'em on the perairie."

"Very well. But there is a stranger here. Look through your larder and see if you can't find him some supper."

Without hesitation, but with some grumbling, the man did as he was bidden; and while Bill Blake eat in silence, Mrs. Dorland withdrew to the wagon which she usually occupied.

"Then the other colored man came in, and for a little there was utter silence.

Then suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the stranger sprung to his feet.

"Thar's something in the wind—ef I kin do anything fur you I'll do it, but—"

He said no more. A moment his tall, stout form loomed up in the light of the flaring fire—then it sunk to the earth as a sheet of flame seemed to leap at the camp from out of the darkness on every side. There was the thunder of a volley of fire-arms, discharged at point-blank range, cries of pain from the camp, a chorus of wild yells from without, and then a thunderous, murderous charge of a band of fiends, who rushed into the camp like demons incarnate, to utterly destroy.

Fortunately, perhaps, Mrs. Dorland heard no more after that one first volley. Right through the center of her forehead there crashed a bullet, and she sunk back into the wagon a corpse.

Once, twice, spoke her husband's pistols, before he too fell dead in the moonlight.

The two colored men were down also, and though only wounded, their agony did not last long, since a knife-thrust for each had quieted them forever.

"Look over this carrion," said a harsh, cruel voice. "Not one must live to tell this night's story. If an accident has sent Bill Blake under, you needn't mourn over it. He's too soft-hearted for real work, and he wouldn't have stopped much to play us false here."

Mark Dorland was dead as he lay there, and near him were three other corpses; but of Bill Blake there was not a trace.

The boy, too, was missing, though his safety was largely a matter of chance. He had fol-

lowed the little Indian girl, had crouched unnoticed in the darkness, only half-seeing, only half-realizing the hideousness of the drama of massacre that was being played before him. In the very midst of it all, his young heart was filled too full and he fainted away.

In that long death-swoon he at least remained silent, and so, unseen, while the search was being made. No one seemed to know of his presence or that of the Indian girl in the neighborhood, and therefore, if not found by chance, it would not be suspected.

An hour, or perhaps two later he came crawling out from the bushes.

There was no need to tell him of the dreadful work that had been done. In the little dingle all was silent and voiceless, and yet every blade of grass and every quivering leaf was telling the story of nameless horror. And in the center of the little glade, trembling, wild-eyed and full to the lips of fear and despair, through all the weary night crouched the boy, Dane Dorland, keeping his vigil in the midst of the mangled corpses.

Dawn came at last. In the east arose the bright sun, just as footsteps sounded near. Unconscious of the tragedy of the night, Scarlet Bear came to claim his daughter.

Even Indian stoicism recoiled at the scene before him. The wagons were overturned and plundered; the two colored men lay side by side, hacked, ghastly corpses; Mark Dorland lay covered with blood from a dozen wounds; while little Dane stood by the side of his dead mother.

"Oh, mother! mother!" burst from the lips of the boy, unconscious of the savage listener. "I could not help you—a little unarmed boy; but I could have died, too. I was a coward or I would have been beside you. Forgive me, speak to me, give me one sign before I leave you forever!"

Was it an answer? At that moment a streak of light, crimson and gold, from the east, shot between the boughs, and fell fairly upon the white and rigid cheek.

The boy started, then dropped upon his knees. His one hand he placed over the heart that now forever was still, his other hand he raised upward toward the skies.

"I could not fight for her; but the day will come when I will avenge her. So help me Heaven I will trace out, track down and slay, until the last devil of them all is dead. No love or hope; I live, boy as I am, for revenge. On my mother's corpse I swear it."

Downward drooped his head and upon those marbled lips he pressed the one long, last kiss that recorded his oath, while at his back red lips muttered:

"Scarlet Bear swears, too."

He also was bereft, since of his granddaughter there was left no sign or trace.

CHAPTER III

ALL ALONE IN HIGH PINE.

SIX thousand feet above the level of the ocean lies High Pine, nestling amidst the still higher peaks that surround it. From time immemorial it has been the center of a mining region. Years before the golden sands of the Sacramento revealed their story in Sutter's

flume, these regions, hidden, wild, and almost inaccessible, as they were, had felt the miner's tread.

Of High Pine there were many legends; but little was really known until by a lucky chance several gold-hunters drifted there, at a time when Mexican and Apache alike were on different duty than guarding its treasures. True, they did not tarry long, but when they drifted back again with buckskin bags well filled they told such marvelous stories that a rush began, and now, at the time when our story fairly opens, it was a mining-camp of much promise, though those who reached it were environed by dangers, and oppressed with difficulties. There were rich washings to be found for the seeking; and old, abandoned mining-shafts marked the spots where there still lay richly-paying rock.

Yet the future of High Pine remained in doubt, notwithstanding for almost a year it had been steadily increasing in importance. So far the miners had been of that drifting class who had not the capital to make permanent improvements, and in spite of the many thousands that had been taken from gulch and shaft, it was not a wealthy place, but was known afar as the abode of a hard crowd.

Where there is money, and characters of such stamp, never fear but what, at every risk, there will be places of resort established on such scale as will suit their patrons. Though half the town was canvas, and the other half was two-thirds under ground, there was more than one rum-mill, where roughs and gamblers congregated, to while away the hours by the use of the festive pasteboards, or hoisting in the fatal benzine. In truth, it took a man of nerve that was backed by liberal and effective use of fist and revolver, to remain on anything like safe terms with the denizens of High Pine.

Yet beautiful Marion Blake came there, and alone.

A strange position was it for a fair young girl; and yet one somewhat easily explained if one goes back a little.

Some six months before the time when we take up the history of High Pine a young man, giving out his name as Charley Blake, had come there.

He was a quiet, resolute sort of fellow, hardly of the kind that would fraternize readily with the rougher elements of the camp, yet one who seemed well able to take care of himself. He had some money too, and having entered into a sort of partnership with a man known as Sacramento Sam, he settled down to work, plain and simple, without any foolishness.

As a result he met with what bade fair to be an immense success. At the distance of perhaps a mile from High Pine the two took possession of the beginning of a shaft that looked as though it might have been abandoned a hundred years or more, and before long they struck very rich ore.

There were many of these abandoned pits; for those who had worked the mines in the past had cared nothing for the gold-bearing rock unless it was very rich, since they loaded it on mules, in its native state, and packed it many miles before it was put through the processes of stamp and smelter, or amalgamation. Indeed these mines

had been but hastily worked, by men who came as on a foray; and thought that they were lucky if they could snatch away a few loads of the rock without a desperate fray with the Indians who lurked among or guarded the approaches to these fastnesses.

With the capital that they had to invest, Charley Blake and his partner worked wonders. As there were men there who had tried the washings in the neighboring gulches and along the several streams of the neighborhood without success, there was labor to be had without paying too great a price. From the best of these men Blake picked his hands, and fitting out several arrastras, worked by horse-power, they began to see what their "go-down shaft" was worth.

If they could have kept it to themselves all might have gone on well, but unfortunately jealous eyes were on them, and before long each carried his life in his hand every time he ventured outside of the stockade that they had the prudence to build.

"I tell you, Sam, I can trust you and about three more," said Blake, one day, "but outside of that if every man, woman and child in High Pine was shot, I'd feel much safer."

"It's a purty bad place, pard; but not quite as bad as you set it up to be. I've been round a bit, as you know, an' I reckon I never saw a place yet that amounted to anything, where a man's life was worth much—I'm not going to back water here—you bet—an' as we two seem to pull together fer about all we're worth, we'd just better keep the traces stretched an' wait till we come to the roughest part of the road afore we grumble."

"All right, old man. I've put every dollar I'm worth in this venture—and about all that Marion could spare. I'm bound to win, or go out of here feet foremost. If anything happens to me, remember she is to pay the expense of a man in my place, and have half the profits of the mine. But that's writtendown in black and white, so I may as well drop this; but the fact is, I've been writing a letter to the girl—I only wish I could have her here—and I feel so blue that I'm green, sea-green, with tufts of moss."

Both of them laughed, and yet it must have been a premonition of evil, since, within twenty-four hours, Charley Blake was shot.

Perhaps it was a chance blow that struck him down, but at any rate his soul seemed absolutely pinned to his body, and though he did not die at once and the wound was not of an absolute certainty fatal, it seemed beyond possibility that he should recover.

In that lawless camp the act scarcely caused more than a ripple of excitement; and only Sacramento Sam felt any real sorrow.

He seemed sorry enough.

"It's rough, pard, ju t when we was rigging up the smelter, and goin' fur the silver. I don't feel half like work with you lyin' here, an' somehow I feel as though my turn was comin' too, an' mighty soon. I always did say we was strikin' it too thick to thrive."

He held his partner's hand as he spoke, and looked down with the kindly earnestness of a big, rough heart, on the man whose pale lips scarcely moved as they murmured an answer:

"Don't worry about me, Sam; I had to go some day, and one time is as good as another; but when I'm gone do the square thing by Marion, and some days you'll be a rich man yet. If I could only see her before I die; but of course there's no use in thinking of such a thing. I'll lay my bones here in High Pine and she'll never see where I'm buried. Do the square thing by her, Sam; that's all I ask."

And Sacramento Sam, not knowing what else to do, seated himself to wrestle with pen and paper, for there was a chance to forward a letter by some outgoing miners, and in his plain, straightforward way he told Marion Blake of what had happened, and how her brother lay at the point of death, with many weary weeks for recovery at the best, but promising to do the best he could for him and his interests.

After that the business of the mine dragged heavily on, for Sam seemed to have lost his grit, until one day the end of Charley Blake came, sooner than was expected. His life went at the last like the snuffing out of a candle.

After the funeral Sam went to the town.

"See here, pard, I want to take a half-interest in that hole in the ground down yonder."

Sam looked up and saw that the speaker was Faro Frank, a man whom he had never liked, though he had much influence with the wilder portion of the population of High Pine.

"I want no partner—I've got one and when I go back on him I'll be lyin' in a box about six feet long, in the bottom of the shaft."

"No nonsense, Sam. There's not another man in town that would risk the chances backing you up. There's a party going to chip into the game down there, and you won't have the cards to play ag'in' them. But I mean sport; and can hold a full hand, every time."

As he spoke Faro Frank dropped his hands to the two revolvers in his belt; but quick as fighting Sacramento Sam's hands were on his own weapons.

The two hesitated. The quarrel was nearly joined, but suddenly each turned upon his heel, and they walked apart.

"Hello, what's this?" exclaimed a bystander.

A canvas-covered wagon, such as does duty for a stage in such regions had just driven up, and halted.

It was a novelty in High Pine—the first that had appeared there—and Sacramento Sam, following the crowd, approached it, just as a loud cheer arose from the bystanders. At the door appeared a woman, young, beautiful and alone, who cast an affrighted glance about her, but said, in the sweetest of tones:

"Can you tell me, gentlemen, where I can find Charles Blake?"

"I'm sorry, miss; you're a day after the fair. He's gone under; but I'm his partner—Sacramento Sam."

As he spoke there was the hollow, muffled report of a derringer, and Sam fell shot through the breast, at the very feet of Marion Blake as she stepped down from the stage.

CHAPTER IV.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST.

WHEN you look forward, a dozen years seem, in the agony of despair, or the yearning im-

patience of hope, to be an eternity. When you look back, a dozen years are but a flash in a dream.

And so, a dozen years have gone since the night whose massacre we have detailed in the opening chapters, and again a scene opens upon a camp by a river side.

Spread out like a great dull background to some broad, hastily done picture, the tawny desert stretches away, and away, until it is lost in the trace line of the hills that loom away beyond.

In the foreground, however, there is a winding line of greenery, where the river threads through the barren plains, gathering wealth on its banks as it goes. Here and there the thread swells out into a little grove; here and there, by, or in, some dry *arroyo* there is a bit of green woods, with their smooth, cool, green trunks and tiny leaves, growing under the pitahaya—the fruit-bearing cactus, that stretches its tall trunk a dozen feet higher—and on the ground the thistly *biznaga*, the silvery mints, the browned, hair-leaved grasses; yet from river to foot-hills the scene is one of loneliness and desolation.

Through these desert plains not so long ago unpressed by any heel save that of the savage, there are roadways, and trails—dangerous, but even well beaten. Not every gold-seeker now strikes straight for the Sacramento sands; but many fling themselves first among the fastnesses of nature and the resorts of the red savage, if, by chance, there, among the greatest dangers, they can find the greater gains.

So, this evening, near sunset a little party of mounted men threw themselves somewhat wearily from their steeds, and made their camp for the night but a stone cast from the water's edge.

Of the party the majority were men well used to these regions, with all their dangers; and they were here in the capacity of guides and body-guards for two gentlemen, who, though fearless enough, and well versed in the handling of all deadly weapons, were traversing these regions for the first time.

One of these men, the motive power and leader of the party, was Murray Brant. He was a strange-looking man to meet upon such an expedition, for in his face you could read, at first glance, nothing but a placid good nature, that only asked to be well fed and to take life easily. Mimbres Matt when he was introduced to him as his chief, could hardly restrain his astonishment that such a man should be willing to risk the hardships and dangers of the journey.

"That's a lively-lookin' eye to sling along the double sights; and I'd like to see them pudgy fingers a-grippin' at the handle of a bowie. How a buckin' cayuse would shake them two hundred pounds of fat into a jelly. Lordy! I kin see him a-wastin' away under the br'ilin' sun of an Arizony desert. If he hadn't stamps I'd see him hanged afore I'd move a rod with sich a fat-chopped, oily-tongued, old galoot."

But Murray Brant *had* stamps, and courage and nerve besides, more than Mimbres Matt dreamed of, good judge of human nature as he professed to be; and it was not long before he

discovered that this oily little mass of flesh had somewhere within it a will that even he could not bend, and day by day his respect rose for his employer.

The friend and confidant of Murray Brant was a middle-aged man, in almost every way his antipodes. Tall, gloomy, seldom speaking, and then in a harsh, imperious way, Malcolm Dane had every appearance of being what he was, a bold, headstrong and courageous man.

What secret tie there might be between these two no one could guess; and even Matt Goodwin had been unable to learn what was their exact errand; though he had no doubt that they had some mining speculations in view. This evening Matt touched his hat in a sort of half-military salute, and remarked to Malcolm Dane:

"We're as like as not to get a touch of fun near here. If you look along yonder mountain range you'll see a notch in the line where a pass cuts through the hills. Apache come swarming out of there sometimes, like grasshoppers on a bender. We've hardly reached the line of their trail yet, for I made it convenient to stop for the night on this side of their crossing-place. All along there, plain as it seems, there is a line of quicksands, and from that side we are safe from attack; while, unless they've nosed us out and follow on the trail, there's little chance of any one that knows the country striking us on this. Still, it's just as well to keep your eyes open. High Pines lies right over yonder, beyond that other mountain notch, and if anything happens, that is your best way to strike."

"Thank you; though perhaps it might be as well to tell Mr. Brant. It is his frolic, as much as mine, and he should know the chances for fun."

"That's it. He's so smooth and oily you can't hold him in no trap, and so I posted you that you'd know how heavy to back your hand if a game begun."

After this careless explanation Matt turned away and engaged his sharp eyes in watching that the arrangements for the night were properly made. The men looked after the horses, got ready the supper, or talked together in a careless sort of way; while Murray Brant and Malcolm Dane, a little apart from the rest, carried on a conversation in low tones.

"Matt tells me that we are approaching a dangerous trail. Perhaps that is the reason why I feel strangely out of sorts to-night. Yet I never knew such a bit of intelligence to unnerve me before. It makes one shiver at the possibility of growing childish in old age."

"Mimbres Matt always is telling stories of that kind—and don't hit very wide of the truth either. Don't you know that every foot of this trail is full of danger? Bless your soul, Malcolm, if you are going to be unnerved at such a chance what will become of you when the real, actual work begins? If I hadn't seen your courage tried, if I didn't know that you had plenty of nerve in the face of any danger, I'd think—well, heaps!"

"Thanks. It's not the tangible that overcomes me; it is always something intangible, unreal. All day I have felt a nervousness, that I can't rid myself of."

"Signs of a bad conscience, I should say.

Get hipped myself when I have nothing to do but dream over the past. Only cure I know of for such a case is to be full of some devilment of the present or future. Any special recollections been bothering you to-day?"

As Murray Brant spoke he looked up with a pleasant, good-natured smile on his fat face, yet Dane was troubled in spite of himself. There was something in the fishy gray eye that gave to him a profound meaning to the jocular words.

"Nothing—and yet if my vaguely troubled thoughts took positive shape it is possible there might be something to shudder at. I remember—ah, I remember something that befell me to-day a dozen years ago. For years I had been on a trail—on this day I tracked him down."

"And found him so well that he never could be lost again for all time. Well, well!" continued Murray Brant, caressing his fat chin with his chubby fingers, and uttering a low, gurgling laugh. "How strange it is! Now that you remind me of it, I believe this is just about anniversary time in my life, too. I wouldn't wonder if I was to look back twelve years but there might be something that the average man would not care to contemplate. But I don't look back, you see. I only look forward; and take my time even to doing that. I've got a very pretty nest egg, and in course of time, when I've gathered in other nest eggs which I wot of and incubate, I shall hatch out about forty millions. That will do to retire with, and there will be sufficient enjoyment to take out of those millions to prevent any worry about those things in the past which are all forgotten."

"But are they forgotten?"

"To be sure. Do you suppose fortune is going to play such a scurvy trick as to trip up our heels just in the high tide of prosperity? Wait until we get in and you see just what is before you. I've been watching you all day, Malcolm, and I may as well tell you I didn't like your moody way. I wouldn't have such a look about me, and I warn you that when my friends don't take a hint I remove them—sometimes."

"You are right, Brant," answered the other, with a reckless laugh. "This is the last sign of weakness you shall see in me. As you say, why should I grizzle over things that are all forgotten?"

"But they are not!"

The two men bounded to their feet as though a volley of fire-arms had rattled over their heads.

In their very ears a mysterious voice, coming from where or whom they knew not, uttered those words in a stern, low and yet distinctly audible whisper.

Revolver in hand the two looked around, but saw no one near that could have spoken.

What was the meaning of those words? Were they spoken as threat or warning? They knew not, and yet, as with pistol in hand they peered around, it would have gone hard with him who uttered them had they chanced to mark him down.

Mimbres Matt, in much surprise, saw them start up, and came rushing toward them,

While they tried to offer some reasonable explanation for their apparently unreasonable excitement, a cry from one of the men served to divert their attention.

Right upon a trail to their camp, and at some distance, dimly limned against the sky, could be discerned the forms of two riders, advancing at a gallop—and one of the riders was a woman.

Mimbres Matt did not lose his caution. He threw himself upon the bare back of his horse and went out to meet them. In a few moments he returned, bringing the two strangers with him.

Of the new-comers the one was a stout, heavily-bearded, and well-armed man. The other was a girl-woman of perhaps seventeen, who sprung lightly from the saddle, and advanced directly to the fire. From one of the party to another her glances turned, and every one there saw that her face was one of rare, dark beauty; but only one there was who seemed to recognize it. Murray Brant, shrinking back a little, muttered to himself:

"By heavens, it is Lalaree!"

CHAPTER V.

A MIDNIGHT SWOOP.

AS Brant shrunk Back Malcolm Dane stepped forward and confronted the new-comers.

"Well, stranger!" said the heavily-bearded man, standing before him with a brace of bridles slipped over either arm, but his hands so disposed that they would drop almost without a motion upon the handy revolvers that hung at either side.

"Well, yourself," retorted Dane, not more than half pleased with the proud manners that were almost a challenge. "You seemed in a wonderful hurry to get into our camp. Now that you are here just make yourself at home."

"Rather—you just bet on that thar. My name's Burke, an' ef ye'r' flush of grub I don't mind ef yer sling it out about the time you men-critters feed the annimiles. We've rid hard to-day, on a blamed thin breakfast; an' ain't much more to speak of in my haversack. I don't keer so much for myself, but the little gal kinder weakens when you shut down on the pervissions. I've a show of dust in my buckskin, though, an' ef you say the word I'll pay my footin'. I ain't the kind of a chap that wants to ring in, an' I see thar's a couple of tenderfoots runs this gang."

Dane accepted the appellation of "tenderfoot" as rather a dubious compliment; and felt none too well pleased by the whole of this man, Burke's, address.

"You are welcome to our hospitality, such as it is, and there's no need to insult us by talking of pay. At the same time it would be just as well if you had thought of the young lady, and her wants, before you started on the trail, and not trusted to the chance of picking up these same 'tenderfeet' at the end of each day."

"Bless yer soul, young man, thar's no use to get r'iled with me. 'Tain't my fault ef we was hustled out without a moment's warnin'. Fact is, I jist had a dream. Suthin' said, 'Burke, git up an' git; thar's fun at High Pine.' I got. Ef

I'm to have a hand in that fun, I ain't goin' to drop by the wayside. Ef I'm to be rubbed out on the road, what's the use to load up with things I won't need when I git thar? Eh! You hear me, pard?"

"So you are going to High Pine. If that be the case, we will travel together, I suppose; but I confess I do not anticipate much fun on the way, or at the end of the journey. If, however, fun is the object of your journey, I don't see why you should have brought the young lady with you. From what I know of that town, it is scarcely the place for her."

"Put a peg right thar. Tie a knot in that string, fur you hit the solid truth, plumb center. It tain't no place fer Maud; but she's all I've got an' I'm the hull world an' ther rest of menkind to her. She's been kinder keepin' me straight fur the last few year, an' now, whar I go she follers. Ten million thousand Apache couldn't drag us apart—an' ef it's in the wood I reckon I kin take keer on her. Ef I can't, then you watch an' you'll see us go under together."

"Still, that hardly explains why you should have left, wherever you did leave, unprepared for the journey that you knew had an ending of such undesirableness."

"Didn't I tell yer the devil war a-drivin'? Thar, that's enough of sich foolishness," turning to the girl, who still stood silent, but listening to the conversation, and scanning first one countenance and then another, in a furtive, though thorough way. "Be back in a minute, Maud. Must look after the hosses afore we see to ourselves."

While Burke was gone, Dane attempted to gain some further information from the girl; for he had learned next to nothing from the father. But her answers were mostly monosyllabic, though she seemed perfectly at home, accepting the proffered hospitalities without sign of hesitation.

Meantime Murray Brant had withdrawn wholly from the circle, and stood where the light of the camp-fire could not fall upon and reveal his features.

He had watched the two strangers narrowly, and listened to the conversation between Burke and Dane with the air of one who was weighing well some idea just come into his brain. As Mimbres Matt passed near him he made a sign that brought him to his side.

"Who is this talker? you must certainly know him, for I judge that he is no stranger to these regions."

"Know him? Of course I know him—only he has a different name for every camp. It's Burke to night—next time he turns up it'll be Jones, er Brace, er Geyser Joe, er somethin' else."

"And the girl that is with him?"

"That's his darter. She kin ride, an' shoot, an' foller the trail with the best on 'em, but it's been a year er more sence I seen her. She jines him every now an' then: but most on the time he keeps her hid away. Treat her gently, pard, fur she's a lady, she is, ef thar is a suspicion of Injun blood thar; an' he's a bad man when you get him r'iled."

"They get as far as Frisco sometimes, don't they?"

"So I reckon; but you can't prove it by me."

"Very well. He seems like a rough, quarrelsome fellow, that I hardly care to have much to say to; but treat him well, and if he chooses to travel with our party I can't say anything against it."

By this time Burke had come in and taken his place near his daughter, and a few moments later the two took their places around the meal that was spread upon the ground, and eat heartily of the rude repast. Then, after some little conversation of which Burke took upon himself the greater share, they retired to one side and flung themselves down within the mystic circle of a hair lariat, with saddles for pillows.

Arrangements were made by the rest for standing guard, and in half an hour silence reigned through the little camp.

Several hours passed.

Save those on guard, every one seemed buried in a profound sleep. Yet, after a time, Malcolm Dane opened his eyes, as wide awake as he had ever been in his life. He listened; but everything was silent. He raised his head quietly and looked around; and was startled at seeing that Brant had just risen from his blanket, and was stealing away toward the spot where Burke and his daughter were sleeping.

Dane knew that Brant must have a reason for his movements—unless he was walking in his sleep, and he was far too wide-awake and practical a man to indulge in any such nonsense as that. What was his intention? Whatever was his design Dane felt like fathoming it. As Brant crept away, he, at a little distance, followed him.

Right to the spot where the two were sleeping went Murray Brant. Heavy and clumsy though he might seem, no trailer of them all could have dropped his feet more lightly.

But a few yards away they halted, listened, and looked around. Dane dropped out of sight instantly.

Reassured, the man shook his fist menacingly at the two sleepers.

"Curse you, Bill Burke!" he muttered, "while you live there is danger in the air. I have you at my mercy now, and if I could trust that wild-eyed partner of mine, I'd wipe you out just where you lie. I'm not sure it would not be best. I can trust Matt and the Mexicans; and Dane can be—assuaged. And this girl, too! Another reason, now!"

From his belt he drew a revolver, and without raising the hammer he sighted deliberately at the head of the sleeping man.

"There is moonlight enough to do it; but it would be awkward to miss. No; I will not run the risk. I will wait. Nathan and Felipe will rid me of him for a hundred dollars, and that will be more certain. Yet, after all, it might be that he forgets. If I only knew. And then there are others; I never knew how it came that I never stumbled across them. Life has its thorns too. I would trade half of my success to be assured that I was really forgotten."

He ceased muttering, and returned the weapon to the sheath at his side. Not a minute too soon did Dane conceal himself; and he watched his partner making his way back, with a feeling

that there was more mystery about the man than even he had dreamed of.

From what he had caught of the muttered sentences, he was sure that there was a chance for trouble ahead, and though he was desperate and reckless enough so far as the world was concerned, he wanted to consider what were the risks he ran now, just when fortune seemed opening out for him, and there was a chance to redeem once more his shattered fortunes.

Believing that there was much danger of attracting attention if he attempted to regain his blanket, and not wishing to remain in Burke's neighborhood, he crawled away in a direction that would take him out of what seemed, somehow, a dangerous neighborhood.

Away from the camp he passed, speaking to one of the sentinels as he went, and finally threw himself down in the darkness. It was time now for him to decide how far he was willing to go with a man who, though rich, and having a name in the mining world, and without whom his brilliant hopes would be broken, yet seemed likely to stop at nothing. Malcolm Dane was no longer a young man; he could be passionate, or cold-bloodedly cruel; but, all the same, he began of late years to look more carefully after his neck.

And with this partner of his he saw that there was a possibility of risking it.

Pending a decision of these points he fell asleep.

How long he slept he could not have told, but his awakening was rude and instantaneous. There was a sudden thunder and rush of horses' hoofs, and as he sprung, all startled to his feet, three-score of Apaches charged over the very spot, opening an infernal chorus as they rode right down upon the little camp beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

SAVED FOR SLAUGHTER.

THE sudden charge, the chorus of yells, and the cracking of pistol-shots, fairly bewildered Malcolm Dane. He awoke from a quiet, dreamless sleep, to the sternest, most dread realities of life. Confounded, dazed, and yet full of an instinctive antagonism, he bounded to his feet, and jerked from his belt the only weapon he had at hand, and fired once, right in the face of the nearest of his foes.

A red-skin gave a howl of mortal agony, and throwing up his arms, fell so close to him that he could almost have touched him with his foot.

It was a daring, but a senseless movement upon his part. Had he remained quietly crouched where he lay, it is more than likely that he might have entirely escaped the notice of the savages. As it was, they fell apart to either side, and then closed in once more. He was surrounded; and in another moment was at their mercy. Though the main body went thundering on, half a dozen braves wheeled their ponies sharply and bore against him in one overwhelming mass. Not a shot was fired, not a knife was used; but before his finger tightened again upon the trigger, he was beaten back, buffeted, and a strong hand had struck him to the earth.

He was not senseless, or even severely wounded, but the weapon having been knocked far from his hand, he lay motionless under the shower of Apaches that leaped down upon him. In a

twinkling a bit of green hide was twisted about his wrists and ankles, and he found himself a bound captive, at the mercy of the red fiends, who, he knew, if not prevented by outside interference, in the end would slaughter. His only hope was that in the fight that now was raging, his comrades would have so far the best of it that the Indians might be compelled hastily to abandon him.

Even then it was almost a certainty that they would brain their captive before they would relinquish him.

The camp was not far on, however, and there the battle had been joined, almost as soon as the struggle with the single man. There had been no check or pause around Malcolm Dane, but the main line crashed straight on.

Dane could hear the noise of the fight, and the flash, flash of fire-arms lit up the darkness like the sudden glare of rapid lightning. He heard the harsh, stern voice of Mimbres Matt, rallying his men, and knew that in spite of the suddenness of the attack, they had not been taken by surprise. Every man in that little camp bounded at once to cover, and though the Apache charge sought to drive them out, yet it was found that the camp had been located so skillfully that nothing but an attack on foot could possibly prevail.

As the Indians swept by, bullet after bullet swept into their ranks, aimed by men who lay upon the ground and who cast no shadow and offered no mark to attract a return volley.

The horsemen of the desert made no halt. Save a glimpse or two of men taking to cover as they came up, they had seen nothing of the white men, though more than one had felt their bullets. They fired a volley of arrows at random, and rushed by like a cyclone, as though in hasty retreat.

At no great distance they wheeled again. Their surprise had been a failure; perhaps largely owing to that first shot of Dane's, which served as an electric warning to his friends beyond. They counted on a surprise, too. No soldiers were they to fight in a forlorn hope, or struggle firmly and slowly on through an avenue of deadly fire until the remnant could at last meet a brave and dangerous foe in hand-to-hand fight.

Yet, if they could have surprised by the quickness of their wheel the white men just breaking out from cover, the Apaches would have given the intruders blow for blow, believing that in the open field they would be certain to bear them down by sheer weight of numbers.

No such error as that did Mimbres Matt allow, though he felt exultant over the result of the first attack. He was close at Murray Brant's shoulder, and to him whispered his joy.

"They mean business, cunnel, an' that's whar the condemned galoots made the'r mistake. Ef they'd struck straight in to steal the hosses, we'd hed to come out an' fight 'em, an' they could 'a' coaxed us outer kiver nicely. Now, we've got them on a string. They don't hold a trump. You bet we won't let 'em make a single stake as long as we kin deal with a sanded deck."

"Where is Dane, though? He should have

been here with us, but I have seen nothing of him since the attack began."

"He is down at the other end of the string, with Felipe and Nathan, I reckon, lookin' arter the stock. He thinks as much of that filly of his as if she was his squaw an' kids, with a right smart sprinklin' of dust throw'd in. Thar! Like as not he fired that shot."

"I have my doubts. Who was it that fired the warning shot, that just in time woke the camp?"

"I give Felipe credit fur that; but there may be something in what you say. I'll— Wait! Hyer they come again. Keep as low down as you kin, an' shoot straight."

The second attack of the red-skins was not even as vicious as the first; and they swept away in the direction whence they had originally come, after a volley or two from either side, by which Brant's party received no damage, though more than one Indian winced or fell under a leaden messenger.

But hardly had the charge gone by when a yell of triumph arose from a score of throats, and sounds as though from Pandemonium broke loose, assailed the ears of the startled whites, while almost at the same time, from the opposite side, they heard the noise of horses' feet, and looking in that direction saw two dark forms dash away.

"Ha! Yonder goes our visitors—Burke and his strange-looking half-breed daughter—or I am much mistaken. The coward! He runs at the first alarm! But what is the meaning of those yells?"

"By heavens! they've taken in some one of the crowd. Listen, look! They have a prisoner, and are carrying him away."

"A thousand dollars to ten that it is Dane! Curses on it, I cannot afford to lose him just now. Mount your men, and we will charge. We must rescue him."

"We can try it, an' I on'y wish we could; but we haven't the crowd to do that kind of fightin'. The three Greasers are solid behind a tree, er crawlin' inter a camp with a knife in their fists; but take 'em ag'in a gang o' roarin', red-hot 'Pash, an' they'll run to a man."

Matt spoke rapidly, though without much thought. He was watching what was transpiring on the moonlit plain. The band of Indians was sweeping away, and in their very midst, still bound hand and foot was Malcolm Dane.

Taking in the scene with his quick eye, and urged once more by the voice of Murray Brant at his elbow he gave his orders, and from the line of shadowed timber his men, heretofore invisible, leaped out. No time was wasted; but quickly they were in the saddle ready to charge to the rescue, though there was none there not hopeless of the result.

Yet just as they were launching on their swoop Matt held up his hand.

"Hark! Some one is stirring up a hornets' nest, if they only hold them a moment!"

True it was, there was music in the air.

When the Apaches turned away from their second attack they did not go together empty-handed. Malcolm Dane was picked up from the ground and flung across a pony in front of a brave. What his fate would be it was not hard

to guess. Beaten back from their sudden attack, with the loss of several of their number the Apaches' prisoner would be but reserved for the tortures they were so anxious and knew so well how to inflict. Hope of rescue he had but little, and he hung there like an animal going to the shambles. Half a mile they flew over the plain, captors and the captured—and then came a diversion when least expected, for the eyes of all turned with anxiety to the rear.

From the sheltering line of timber to the left there suddenly dashed a single horseman, magnificently mounted, on a steed of size and strength, that seemed fairly to skim over the ground, as horse and rider hurtled down upon the flank of the red-skins like a thunderbolt.

The rider was but a youth, if one judged from his form, which was hardly up to the middle size, but he managed his horse with a graceful ease that betokened both skill and strength, though the reins lay loosely across the neck of the animal which he managed entirely by the iron pressure of his knees. He was dressed entirely in black, his loose garments clinging round him in graceful lines, while over his shoulder there floated a long black plume, fastened to its place by a great golden buckle, in which there blazed a single brilliant which, though not extravagant in size, was of the purest water, and seemed to send out a million scintillations and coruscations.

The jewel above was scarcely as brilliant as the dark eyes that flashed beneath the broad rim of his black sombrero. Keen, piercing, and set as though the youth was animated with the most desperate of purposes, they surveyed the scene, or gave a glance at the land that lay beyond the rushing squadron of Apaches.

In either hand the youth clutched a heavy revolver, and he rode ready to open the ball with them the moment he was discovered, though not a shot did he fire until he was almost within arm's length of the nearest Indian.

Then there was a rattle and crash of firearms as though a whole platoon was firing by file. The "hist! hist!" of quickly-aimed arrows, and the loud cry pealed forth from a dozen throats, as the red-skins wheeled to meet him.

But from the mouth of the youth there rose no answering shout, though on his lips there was a smile of strange confidence. Right and left rose and rung those deadly revolvers, and right into the heart of the mass he rushed clearing his way straight to the prisoner.

Half a dozen braves had fallen; as many arrows had passed through, or hung from, his clothing. More than one blow had been aimed at his head by hands that never fell—at least upon him; through all he burst, like one who bore a charmed life, and reached the side of the captive.

One other shot he fired; that tumbled from his pony the Apache who held Malcolm Dane. Then, with a quick exertion of strength, seizing the latter, he swung him up and across the pommel of his saddle, scarcely halting, or slackening his speed, and dashed onward in his headlong way, though now in his right hand he brandished a long, keen-pointed bowie, and

struck fiercely with its point at each foe who came within reach.

Through it all Malcolm Dane was conscious, and in his deep excitement never felt the thongs that were now fairly eating their way into his flesh. He knew, though he could not see, that a thunderbolt had torn asunder the Indian ranks; that some one had snatched him from their hands, and carried him clear of the rabble, out upon the broad moonlit plain. Faster and faster he was borne along; and then, with a wild glow of satisfaction he heard a savage cheer as Mimbres Matt leading his own party charged the red-skins.

"Gently, gently, my friend. Before we go further loosen these cords and put me on my feet. You have saved my very soul, and I thank you, but I will feel better as a free man."

"Reserve your thanks; they are a mistake. Instead, offer up your prayers to Heaven, that in another moment it may receive your soul."

"What mean you?"

"I have saved you to slay you. By no mortal hand save mine must you die. At the risk of my own life I snatched you from their hands because by mine only must you die. But first, look me in the face, and if you dare to tell me that you know me not—me, the avenger—then perhaps you may go free."

As he spoke the young man stooped down and with his left hand raised Malcolm Dane's head from where it hung, and turned it so that their eyes should meet.

For an instant only two pair of eyes, strangely alike, met in a double glance, and then Dane's head fell back and he cried in agony:

"Oh, God! my brother!"

"Ay, thy brother's wraith, come for vengeance! See, the knife is in my hand, and thus I strike the death-blow to your felon heart. Die!"

And with that word upon his lips, the knife came down.

At the same instant there was the crack of a rifle near, blending with a cry of mortal pain.

CHAPTER VII.

A LIVING THREAT.

MALCOLM DANE was brave, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, and as careless of his life as most men; but for the moment he was all unmanned. As a prisoner to the Indians he had been willing to take his chances, and had indeed, rather made up his mind to die. But when by such desperate courage he was snatched out of the clutches of his captors, hope revived so high in him that any new revulsion would be terrible. When he heard the vengeful voice of his new captor, when he gazed into his eyes and saw the unbounded hate there, and above all a face in the image of one that had been dead to him for many and many a year, and for which in the past he had been willing to sacrifice life itself—when, in addition, he felt that in the steel-knit fingers of this boy-man he was little more than a child—he uttered the cry that was echoed by, or mingled with, the rifle-shot.

At the same time he felt the wincing of the young man's frame, as though he had been touched more or less sharply by the leaden mis-

sile, and the descending knife swerved from its course.

That instant was taken advantage of. It was Malcolm Dane's only chance, and he was quick to avail himself of it. He flung up his arms, bound though they were, and toppled off, falling heavily to the ground. He caught a glimpse of the dark forms of horse and rider flitting away, and then lay silent and motionless, waiting to see what was next to come.

His friends came. The Apaches were in such thoroughly demoralized retreat that pursuit was not only unnecessary but positively useless. But more than that, they had seen Dane's rescue, and though not understanding it, gave three cheers as they saw the strange horseman dashing away with the bound form lying before him, and they turned upon his trail, supposing that he would soon halt.

The moonlight was too indistinct for them to see or understand the bit of play between the two, but they did see an Indian suddenly rise, take deliberate aim, and then heard a cry of pain from the two on the one steed, and it seemed as though one gave a convulsive spring into the air, and dropped athwart their pathway, a corpse.

Still they did not know whose form it was that was lying upon the plain until Mimbres Matt knelt and placed his hand upon his breast.

"Ho! All right, boyees! His heart hes the action of a steam engine, and he's wu'th a dozen dead men. But I'd give rocks to know who the chap was who chipped in, an' why he's lit out so very lively. Hope those fools won't run themselves into a hornets' nest tryin' fur that red-skin. He'll slide through the grass slicker than a snake. If they kin flush him, an' drive him in on his pards, so that we can know where to place him, that's all I want. Come, Mr. Dane, you're all O. K. - Look up here an' tell us who pulled you through."

Matt, as he spoke, cut the thongs, and moistened the lips and brow of Dane from the canteen that hung at his shoulder.

With a shiver Dane came back to his senses.

"What was he? What meant he? Whither has he gone? Great Heaven, how terribly near I was to death!"

"Right you are, there. Ef it hadn't been for him there would have been an end of you, certain. Ef you ever see him ag'in you kin jist tell him that I, old Matt Goodwin, say he's the boss—an I oughter know what fightin' is. I hope he wa'n't plugged bad, fur I hate to see a feller go in out of the wet jist fur chippin' in to help his friend, let alone a cl'ar outsider. I take it you didn't know him, did you?"

"I had but one look at him, just before that Indian in ambush fired his shot; and I can declare that his face looks wonderfully like one that I once knew. He winced after the shot, and cast me down, so that I have reason to believe that he was hard hit, and that it is not likely I will see him again, since he shot away like an arrow from a bow, leaving me with the senses half-knocked out of my body. But I am all right now. Pay no more attention to me, but see that the red devils do not return and catch you napping."

"Nary nap. I ain't the kind fur that, Felipe

and his brother are on the watch, an' as they have a thunderin' big love fur their carcasses, you will hear sounds from home the minute they heave in sight again."

Sure enough the two Mexican brothers were dimly to be seen in the distance, motionlessly facing the direction in which the Indians had fled.

At a low whistle from Matt, they turned and came silently in.

"No one wants to sleep any more to-night, an' so, ef you ain't eetchin' fur another skrim-midge, I'd advise to pull up stakes an' float out fur yonder gap in the hills. This ain't the only crowd on the war-path, I'll bet high; an' ef thar's trouble ahead, the sooner they know it at High Pine, the better all 'round."

The suggestion was made to Murray Brant, who, all this time, had been remaining perfectly silent. He spoke now, but his words were addressed to Malcolm Dane.

"I can't blame you for losing your nerve a little; but all the same I'd advise you hereafter not to let your wits go wool-gathering. This seeing ghosts by moonlight don't exactly agree with my idea of a partner. Hereafter shoot quicker, and don't fly up in the air when the fun's all over."

"If it had not been for that first shot of mine I've an idea you wouldn't be here discussing what you don't understand. For that matter, I don't understand it either; but one thing I've learned—to keep a bright lookout in the future. As to the man that saved me, it's not likely that I'll see him again. I certainly don't want to."

Though the Indians had disappeared from sight, there was no doubt but that they would hover around within striking distance, and so, in silence, the camp was broken up, and with watchful care the journey was pursued, the band steering right across the short *journada* that ended with the foot-hills they had, at sunset, descried in the distance.

The attack had only hastened their movements by a little, for an early start had been decided upon when camp was pitched, and if they pressed on without halting it was almost certain that they would reach water by sundown of the following evening.

Nevertheless it was a long journey; and one that admitted of no straggling, for about the middle of the day they saw a line of dark forms away behind them telling them that the Apaches were still in the rear, and that it would need but little encouragement to have them make another swoop. From some direction or other they had received reinforcements, and now the band was larger than it was at the time of the attack, decimated as it had been in that stubborn fray.

"There's right smart sprinklin' ov the yellow dust at High Pine, but it's Satan's own job to run the red-skins, gettin' in; an' it's rather worse fightin' the road-agents gettin' out."

"Road-agents! Can't you turn out a few more objectionable features? I thought the journey there, its isolated position and the cost of mining was the principal objection, but they begin to seem the smallest part of the trouble."

"Oh, High Pine is lively, it is; and if any one

has roped you into such a thing as a mining interest, you're in for no end of trouble, too; though if you have the nerve and experience, there's millions to be made there."

"Why, in Heaven's name, didn't you tell me all this when I first talked to you of the trip? I didn't need to run all the risks for a little more of the filthy lucre. It's well enough for Dane here; but I've made my pile, and needn't have been led away to see a shaft floored with gold, and lined to the roof up with diamonds."

Brant spoke in some heat, but he made nothing off of Mimbres Matt, who gave a laugh, as he answered:

"Business, pard, business. I wanted to get in myself; an' ef I'd put you up to the nature of the lay-out you might have took water. Then whar would I have come in at?"

"There seems to be a rush for High Pine. There was that braggart that came into camp last night and then slipped away like the coward that he was. What does such a man as he want?"

"He's no slouch, an' ef he cut an' run fer it, it wa'n't till the fun was over. You'll see him thar, an' the boys of High Pine that tackle him will find him hard to climb. If you want a man that understands mining cl'ar down to the bed rock, go fer him."

"Not very likely. He's not the kind of a man I like. He takes water too sudden. If he had fought it out last night, now, I might have put a good thing into his hands."

"You don't give him a square show. You can bet your last stake that he had his reasons. Mebbe he thought he wasn't treated right in our camp. You'll allow thar was some leetle coolness about the way we took him in. Then thar was the gal, his darter. He's got her to look arter; an' arter he'd let go his shootin'-irons fer all he was worth he just slung the huff fer High Pine. He's white, though, if the gal is a leetle off color. When he puts her in cache he'll come out a-b'ilin', ef thar ain't no word on us thar."

Mimbres Matt did not hesitate to speak a good word for the man who had seemingly deserted them, although he had paid but little attention to him while in camp, and it was plain that Brant not only did not like him, but seemed anxious to awaken the prejudice of the rest against him.

The conversation stopped at this point; and as mile after mile was passed, and the toilsome march began to tell alike on men and horses a sullen silence pervaded the little band.

Sunset, however, as the wind began to blow cooler over the wastes, and the foot-hills were close at hand, and in the far distance they could catch no glimpse of pursuing horseman, or see nothing before them to bar their march, the spirits of all seemed to grow lighter.

"The land of promise is opening before us, Brant," exclaimed Dane. "There's millions before us, and it seems to me I can hear the jingle of our yellow-boys already. And your other little game—ah, Brant, though I become rich as Croesus you'll gather in more than your share of the spoils. Gold is nothing to you—you have always been lucky—but you are going to win more than gold."

"Wait, my boy," answered Murray Brant with something of a rapt look drifting across his oily face. "There is one thing that balks success, and it may stand right here, with both hands outstretched to beckon us back. For a dollar I would stop."

"What, turn and lose all that has been cast into the venture? Once for all I demand to know your intentions. You would bankrupt me in hope and purse, for you know my last dime is invested because I believed your pledged word."

"Tut, tut, man, don't fly so high. When the lead drops all you have to do is to pull out and try again. Men don't often accuse me of a want of nerve—and, by heavens, you sha'n't. I've said I would guarantee you from loss—now doubt me if you dare."

The fat, pudgy hand arose like a flash, and straight at Malcolm Dane's head was leveled a revolver.

"Hold, Brant, we are mad to quarrel here. Have it as you will. I might know you would not turn back without at least one look at the grant that I was lucky enough to secure and which the world knows already that you have gone to develop. Your courage has been too well attested before now. And by it you have won success."

"It is because I had the courage to strike the back trail the moment I saw I was on a false scent that I have succeeded. *That* is the courage that wins. I never throw good money after bad."

"And you never desert a partner?"

"That depends."

For the last time the two men hesitated. Then Malcolm Dane, thrilled with a fear that sooner or later he would be a broken plaything in the hands of his partner, exclaimed:

"In Heaven's name turn then. I absolve you—and will go on my way alone. I have put my last dime in your hands; keep it and cry quits!"

As suddenly Brant's mood changed.

"No, we go straight on. Here is my hand to the end; a hand I have never given you yet, and a hand that never lied. Take it and we are partners to the death. Him who strikes at you I will strike—you will defend me at any cost."

The hands joined, the compact was made; and at that instant they heard a cry from the men in their rear.

Turning, they looked.

A mounted man dashed suddenly up to, and by them, riding within a dozen yards, and as he passed, he shouted:

"Malcolm Dane, remember! The debt is not yet paid. Something still saves you; but here is a death to one of your tools. I know him, and mark him thus."

As he spoke the almost phantom figure threw up his hand, pointing to the rear. There was a flash and a report, and one of the Mexicans, fifty yards behind, pitched heavily from the saddle.

"Number one!" shouted the stranger of the night before, and bending low in his saddle his horse bounded away like a flitting shadow, bearing his rider untouched, away from the balls that hurtled after them.

As he vanished, Murray Brant drew rein; "Number one," he said; is it Felipe that is stricken down? What fresh mystery is this?"

And prone upon the plain lay Felipe, with brains oozing out from the jagged wound in the center of his forehead. When the two had recognized the fruitlessness of pursuit and heard the mocking laugh of the fugitive as he passed unscathed the fire of the revolvers of Mimbres Matt, who was far in advance, and had shouted to Nathan, who flitted by in instinctive haste to avenge his brother's death, they sought the side of the fallen man; but there was not even a quiver of the limbs or a lingering breath.

"You are living by a madman's crotchet," said Brant, coldly. "The meaning of this I know not; but I will keep my vow, beware that you do the same."

Very near to death once more had been Malcolm Dane, and he realized that his life or that of the young stranger must soon be one of the forfeits of the gambling game in hand. What further might have passed between the two was interrupted by wild cries, and the rattling discharge of fire-arms, coming distinctly from the canyon in the hills, toward which their course had been turned.

"Listen! The boys have run him to a hole. His life or ours, Brant, come!"

And the two dashed away toward the pass, from whence issued the sounds of battle.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HAWKS OF HIGH PINE.

THE forms that Brant and Mimbres Matt seen dash away from the camp after the brush with the Apaches were, of course, those of Burke—as the man with many titles now chose to call himself—and his daughter. In the sharp short struggle, as Matt had surmised, he had played his hand for all it was worth, and his weapons, as they spoke, seldom failed to record their tale, though through it all he never once lost his coolness, nor did Maud give any symptoms of the weakness that is generally supposed to be part of the nature of her sex, but crouched at his shoulder, as watchful, as wary and almost as death-dealing as himself.

When the Apaches had wheeled, and given their second volley, as they dashed by, Burke rose up calmly, and gathered the few things that lay upon the ground.

"Come, Lalaree, that's either an end to this frolic, or it ain't. If it are we ain't needed hyer—ef it ain't we kin do more good gittin' along the road to High Pine. We kin raise ther camp ef they don't come in clost ahind us, but I don't want to be corraled hyer. Life's too short, an' it ain't ther place fur my bloomin' leetle flower o' the mount'in!"

The girl followed him without hesitation, or sign of fear; yet, when they had burst away unchallenged from the camp, and had galloped perhaps half a mile into the open plain, and heard the sounds of the distant desperate fight that was being waged by the one man who was boldly charging into the savage band to snatch from their hands their prisoner, Malcolm Dane, they halted and looked irresolutely in that direction.

"Thet's a lively skrimmidge, Maud, an' ef I'd thort thar war sich a chance I'd never pulled stakes till it war over. I ain't no love, somehow, fur thet party; but I ain't goin' back on a white man ef I do think he's a scallywag an' a foe."

"They must certainly have followed up the Indians and brought on the fight again—though I should have thought that old plainsman at their head would have held them in from such madness. Their true policy would have been to make a brush for the hills at once so that the Indians could not head them off, and attack them in the gorges. They are well enough mounted and strong enough to fear no stern chase, or no attack upon the open plain."

"True fur you, little woman; but this yere's somethin' else. Thet's a one-man fou't, er my ears hev lost the'r gift. He rattled off lively while it lasted; but the fun's all over now. I missed it, leetle gal, but I ain't half sorry, 'cos it's your account."

Nevertheless he heaved something of a sigh as he touched lightly his horse's rein, and, wheeling once more, bore away again toward the far distant gap in the mountains.

"I trust you do not forget your duty to your fellow-men on my account," said the girl, after a while returning to the subject.

"Leetle one, I'll tell you gospel truth; it warn't healthy thar. I'd sooner fight a dozen reds, knife to knife, er pistol ag'in' war arrer, than one prowlin', sneakin', onderhanded white man, 'pecially ef he hes the rocks to back him. I hed a warnin'—an' I got, same es I roused out er Muskeeter Bar."

"A warning?"

"Yes, er a dream. I thort a condemned ole cuss war peepin' thru' the sights ov a leetle piece of iron with a hole in it, an' I thort his finger war on ther trigger, an' he war all ready to let her go. Wal, I'm markin' thet cuss, d'ye see? I'll meet him ag'in—maybe I've met him afore—an' when I've got you cached, an' my irons level on him, thar won't be any let up, an' he knows it. But I couldn't call him hyer, 'ith you around. Something *might* happen to me, it's time my turn war a-comin', an' in that camp what would hev become of you, my bloomin' flower ov the foot-hills?"

"Of me? I could have protected myself as I have done more than once, even from—but let that pass. If you have aught to fear from that man, if he is likely to cross your path, beware. He is a villain that would stop at nothing. Better to shoot him down on sight than to risk his slow, hidden, but deadly steps upon your trail."

Burke turned and eyed the girl sharply. There was a concentrated heat in her tones, low and leisurely spoken though they were, that made him suspect that there was something below the surface, but he asked no questions, and the strangely-assorted pair again rode on in silence, and dawn found them far on their unmolested way.

Through the day they pursued their journey, not recklessly but with a careful haste, that would leave some reserve of strength to their gallant animals, even at the close of their weary, waterless, double-day's journey.

Once or twice they caught a glimpse of the

party which they had so unceremoniously left, but owing to the inequalities of the plain and the fact that Burke seemed inclined to take such advantage of them, even to losing time and miles, they were never long in sight. Yet at each successive view they seemed to be nearer.

"They don't save the'r mustangs much, so I s'pose Matt means to camp at the water-hole outside," muttered Burke, as he saw, near sunset, the following party coming on at a hand gallop, and now quite near. "Unless they foller us up we'll push on an' camp at the three-mile spring. I don't want no trouble to-night, but ole Bridger's ghost can't tell what might happen ef I got my talkin' tools laid fur thet oily man's carkase, so I'll try an' skip out er range fur ther present, an' when we git to High Pine—ef I know ary thing about ther delightful condish ov ther civilerzashun—my word's es good es his, an' ther's on'y a question ov tools atween us. But ef he should be actooally trailin' ov me to-night, let him look out. Six to one Geyser Joe don't take water, even 'ith that deceivin'-lookin' devil in ther lead."

He listened a moment, but heard no sounds, though even at this instant those in the rear were discussing him at no great distance, and in no very friendly manner. Then he led the way, dashing along the surface of the, as yet, barely marked canyon that led into the heart of the mountain range.

The way, save for a gentle ascent, was even as a floor, and now the horses sped along with a vigor that seemed magically renewed. Without a doubt they snuffed the still distant water pool, in the refreshing coolness of the evening air, glowing though the west yet was with the crimson embers of the dying fires of day.

On, and still on into the canyon they dashed, and on either hand the sides leaped suddenly and precipitously up.

Then suddenly came a cry, as of a dozen quick crashes of thunder blent, merged into a single roar.

"Halt!"

It was no one man gave voice, but half a score, that, hidden on both sides of the gulch, spoke in concert, and almost at the instant a single man, directly above, stepped into sight, as Burke drew his horse back on its haunches.

"We are twelve to one and the Hawks of the Trail. We never miss the man we have lined. Throw up your hands."

"Up they are!" shouted Burke as his hands went upward like a flash.

But in either one there was balanced a heavy revolver, one poised straight as a sunbeam for the heart of the outlaw.

"I'm Geyser Joe from Texas, with an empty buckskin, an' I hev the drop on you. Let me pass. The first move of a finger I plug you, plumb center. Watch em, Lally, an' the first sign of a head above them rocks tell me, an' I'll let go. They won't rise till he calls them!"

With revolver in either hand the girl faced the fringe of rocks upon the opposite side of the canyon, fearless and cool; and for an instant the tableau continued.

The leader of the Hawks had stepped fairly into view upon the projecting rock, and retreat was almost impossible, while right for his heart

was leveled a weapon which, in the hands that held it, was little likely to miss.

Yet a frown that was not born of baffled cupidity darkened the face of the Hawk.

"Geyser Joe—ha! I know you now. My life is in your hand; but the devil himself cannot save you from our clutches. Ha, ha! You have run your neck into the noose at last. Go on. We grant you free passageway to High Pine; but once there our wings will shadow you, our steps be on your trail, and when you come out it will be feet first, if your carrion corpse is lifted from the ground where it first drops. And yonder half-breed, yonder Indian girl—traitor that you are! kiote-hearted! snake in the grass! renegade devil! I swear that she too shall suffer! Pass on: to High Pine the way is open, and you need not fear. It is there the jaws of the trap will close!"

The voice of the man rolled out with savage distinctness and deadly hate, but he faced Burke without a motion that would indicate a thought of foul play. How it was to end was not so easy to guess, since it was a terrible risk to take the bandit at his word, and go forward with the carbines or pistols of the dozen concealed men ready to mark him down when his back was turned.

Maud broke the spell. From behind a rock she saw a head cautiously rising, with a face laid closely to the stock of a carbine that was settling down to a deadly aim at Burke, who was still covering the outlaw with his pistol.

"Fire!" she exclaimed, and at the same instant her own weapon spoke, just a second before the ball from the outlaw's gun whistled harmlessly but close above Burke's head.

As quickly did Burke's revolver speak, and the man above, with a gasping cry, flung his arms wildly around as he fell heavily to the rock.

Then from behind each rock that had been their shield, the hidden outlaws rose, and began a rattling fire upon the two, who, like arrows from bows, darted forward, making their way toward the gloomy depths of the canyon that stretched away before them.

"Hist! hist!" the leaden hailstones hurtled by. "Death! death!" shouted half a dozen outlaws who, at some distance ahead, were clambering down the sides of the canyon to cast themselves into the path of the fugitives.

Geyser Joe set his teeth hard and led the way, firing as he rode, though in the gathering darkness his shots could be sent with no such certainty as that which he aimed at the man who, high in air, had stood bathed in the last streak of light that came from the now closed western doorway of the day.

Yet on they swept, until, just as the descending bandits had sprung lightly athwart their path with leveled weapons, there rose a sudden cry from Lalaree. A bullet from above had crashed through the horse's spine, and he had sunk with one sudden stumble to the ground.

Then the men in front closed in, even as Burke halted at the cry.

How far the girl had been flung, how badly harmed, he knew not. It was enough that she was down, and that in another instant his foes would be upon him, overbearing him by sheer force of weight and numbers.

"On, on!" shouted a clear, ringing voice; "a friend to the rescue!"

In the moment of supreme need there came the resounding strokes of nearing hoofs, and fairly skimming the floor of the canyon there swept a splendid steed, on whose saddle hung a scarcely visible rider, whose hand almost brushed the ground.

"So, Starlight! steady, boy!" he muttered, in a lower tone, which the intelligent animal seemed to hear and understand.

And then up into his saddle he swung once more, with an easy grace, and crying: "On, on!" he raced side by side with Geyser Joe, though his steed was doubly weighted, for in his arms was clasped the form of Lalaree.

Unharméd they burst away, the sounds of shot and pursuit dying away behind them; and this time there was no hideous look of vengeance on his face, which was calm and gentle as a woman's, though the rescuer was the young man who, the night before, had aimed the knife-thrust at the breast of Malcolm Dane.

"Friend er foe?" queried Burke, with a pistol poised, though he refrained from firing. "Speak quick, an' give me yer handle er I'll drop ye, though the gal's in yer arms."

"A friend, for the night at least, and my handle is Dandy Darke of Angels. Lead on, Geyser Joe, or if you choose follow me, fer this road is lined with danger, fer you and fer me, every inch to High Pine."

"Ye'r' right, an' it's still a long trail to trace."

CHAPTER IX.

DANDY DARKE CHIPS IN.

THE female population of High Pine was not extensive, and the preponderance was Mexican and half-breed, haggard, frowsy and almost unsexed by contact with the ruder elements of the various mining-camps through which they had percolated before at last reaching this place of seemingly uttermost exile—High Pine. The arrival of a woman under any circumstances would have created something of an excitement; but the tragic surroundings to the advent of Marion Blake made the interest doubly intense, and the rush with which those in the neighborhood closed up to the spot created a regular stampede thitherward among those at a distance.

Marion Blake was no ordinary girl, either, though her long, dark eyes burned for a moment with a lustrous light, and a surge of vivid color rose to her cheek, and then died away, first leaving a delicate, rose-tinted bloom, and then a ghastly whiteness. Even her full, beautiful lips paled, though even the great and sudden shock could not alter their utter loveliness of shape and outline. Of a truth, she was marvelously beautiful as she shrunk back a step, with her cloak dropping away from one superbly rounded shoulder, disclosing a perfectly outlined form, and one white, slender hand upraised.

From the body to the crowd she turned her eyes.

"Oh, what does this mean? My brother dead, and now his friend and partner slain at my feet? Are you men here? Will you let the fiend go unpunished? Oh, help him! Here, quick! I forgot. Water! A surgeon!"

She spoke rapidly, and a little wildly, but her self-possession was coming back to her. She sprung to the side of the wounded man and raised his head upon her lap, and stroked back the hair upon his forehead, where the death-damp was already gathering.

The shot that tore through and through Sacramento Sam stunned at first, though it did not at once slay. He gasped for breath, his hand dropped away from the stock of his revolver, whither it had instinctively and convulsively leaped, and he opened his eyes just as Marion took a tin of water from some willing hand and moistened his lips.

"I'm goin', miss," he said, with a faint smile.

"Oh, do not say so. You are my only friend—without you what shall I do here, all alone?"

Something like a smile crept around the corners of his mouth, tensely drawn though it was with pain.

"I can't stay even fer an angel, pard," he whispered. "I'm no good, so you needn't want to tie to me; but stick to the mine, now, every time. There's millions in it. Promise me you will."

"I will, I will!"

"Get a good man to run it for you; pay him well an' give him a share, and little Charley's sister will be a millionairess yet."

"I promise. But can nothing be done for you?"

"Nothin'. I'm going under with my boots on, like better men than Sacramento Sam has done."

"But I swear you shall not die unavenged!"

She raised her shapely hand on high as if to register an oath, but Sam gently stopped her.

"Hush, hush! Maybe it was an accident—more like it was Faro Frank. He's been layin' fer me. Don't get *him* on your trail; though I'm afeared he'll give you trouble enough. I'm goin', little one, good-by!"

"Wait, stay! You were the true friend of my brother—he told me all about you. What *can* I do?"

"If you would, little woman, just fer a send-off to the gates of glory, kiss me once—"

His voice that had been growing more choked and fainter died away in the huskiest of whispers, and he lay silent at her feet with his head pillowed on her arm, and the eyes that were so clear and handsome once, growing dull and filmy.

Without hesitation she drooped her head, a great wave of purely amber hair curtained the two faces, and she pressed her lips once to his.

"Worth dying for. God bless! good-by!"

His head fell back. No dauntless courage or will of iron could help him now, with that rattle in his throat. Sacramento Sam's foot was pressing his last trail—the trail that led infinitely and forever away beyond hill and gulch into the unknown world that sooner or later all must see.

A dozen men had been standing around. As the last faint gasp came, Marion's burden was quietly drawn away from her by several men who worked in the mine, and she arose to her feet half-bewildered, not knowing which way

to turn, a stranger in a strange camp, and that camp, of all others, High Pine.

As she gazed around, more than one man would gladly have stepped forward to offer his aid; but there was an unaccustomed something in her virginal beauty that held them back. Scarcely one man was there then, that might seem worthy to speak to her words of counsel.

One man, however, who had stood calm and unmoved by the scene, now stepped forward with a cold smile on his thin, treacherous lips. His cruel gray eyes sought and held her lustrous blue ones as he spoke.

"Miss, you've struck a rather hard town. Ther's some bad men here, I'm sorry to say, and you'll need a friend that's lively on the shoot if you mean to stay here twenty-four hours. I'm that man—excuse me if I talk right out, but I know the ropes clear to both ends and talk from the book. How can I help you?"

Faro Frank was not a bad-looking fellow, viewed by the High Pine standard; and he had a wonderfully easy manner, but Marion Blake, who had seen something of men and manners, shrunk away from him, as from an adder. She knew him by instinct.

"Thank you, my lady, I'm no saint, that's a fact; but I'm the kind of a man you need now. If Sam, that's just cashed in, was your only stake in these diggin's, you're worse off than a cat, down below, without claws. They planted his pard to-day, and unless there's a little squaw somewhere's up a gulch, *that* firm is dead gone broke. The only wonder is, all the boys in town ain't rushin' down to put a notice up on their mine. I sent a side partner ten minutes ago, and I reckon he's at work on the spot by this time."

"What mean you, sir?"

"Just what I say. I'm jumpin' the claim—though I calculate to sell out my interest to a bigger fish I've heard was on the road to take it."

"But, sir," and Marion's eyes flashed with sudden determination, "the mine is mine. Every dollar, nearly, that I had, I gave my brother to put into it, and I have registered a solemn promise to the one just dead to hold it to the death. I am but a weak girl; but I will be strong. I am alone in this camp; I will find friends. I know nothing of your laws; but I will be wise. Against threat or force I will hold that mine. Against all comers *I stand at bay; touch it if you dare.*"

She folded her arms, drew up her form with a regal air, and looked him firmly in the face. Though it was beneath her to bandy words with the gambler, yet she felt that here and at once she must strike her first blow, if she would keep trust with herself and with the dead.

"Fine words—but they break no bones. I would have been your friend if you had allowed it; now—"

"You, my friend! *You!* you murderer be my friend? Hear me once more. Sooner or later I will call you to account for the blood of Sacramenta Sam, that you this day shed."

"Your little hands," replied the gambler with a sneer, "are hardly likely to undertake the contract that there's not a man in High Pine could

carry. I'll live long if I wait till you bring my life to an ending—and where is the man to take up your quarrel?"

"He is here!" and, as the clear tones rung out upon the air, a young man leaped lightly from his saddle to the ground, and with a graceful bound stood before him.

It was Dandy Darke, just in at High Pine.

Like lightning the hands of Faro Frank dove into the side-pockets of his coat to grasp the ready derringers that lay hidden there. They were self-cocking weapons, that never failed; and, as it were in one time and motion, the right hand turned the barrel in certain, deadly line at the breast of Dandy Darke and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER X.

JUMPING THE GO-DOWN SHAFT.

IN answer to the pressure of Faro Frank's finger upon the trigger there was only the faint, muffled noise of a jarring click. For once the memory of the gambler had served him a slippery trick. He had forgotten that the derringer in his right-hand pocket had just been discharged.

On the instant he knew his mistake, but it was too late to remedy it, for at that minute the barrels of two revolvers looked him in the eyes, while Darke was smiling along the lengths of their shining steel.

"Stir an inch and you're dead! Up with your hands now, and see that they come out empty! I've got the dead medicine on you, and I mean to keep it till we can start on a square basis."

Frank hesitated, but another glance at that face, re-olute, if smiling, decided him. For the first time in High Pine some one had caught the drop from him, and he recognized that he no more wanted to meet certain death than any other man.

It was a terrific humiliation, though, since Marion Blake had found a champion who at the very outset had got the better of him, and he swore to himself a red-hot oath that before they left that spot Dandy Darke should bite the earth. Then in a voice desperately calm, he answered:

"Up they come, and you needn't worry about this hand. If you hold the edge, I pass; and the best we can do is to bunch the cards, jump the game, and try a new deal the next time we meet. I s'pose it'll be shoot on sight."

"I never wait if I can help it. If there's to be a quarrel settle it here, with fists, pistols or knives. Take your choice."

Faro Frank looked keenly at the young man.

He was not near his size; and could scarcely be his equal in strength and endurance. As for skill—with the gloves he had, in the East, held his own in science with such men as the Lazarus brothers, Barney Aaron, and Sam Freeman, and without them had beaten many a bad rough to a standstill. To cross arms in fistic controversy, with this youth, before Marion Blake, would be like balm to his wounded soul. In just three minutes he would beat him to death. Or if death did not come at his mangling he could shoot him afterward all the same.

"Youngster, the pistol is the thing a gentleman deals with; but if you want a round with nature's weapons hand your belt and jacket to some one, and I promise you the settlement between us will be effective."

"Agreed. If I should turn out as handy with my fists as my barkers, it's not hard to say which way the settlement will squint."

Darke somewhat carelessly lowered the muzzle of his weapons, and at once, from the crowd, that had been constantly augmenting, a voice exclaimed:

"Pull on him, Frank, I've got him lined. Now's yer chance."

"An' I've got you lined, you sneakin' kiote—I, Geyser Joe. Throw down them tools, er you'll hear the las' trumpet toot inside er three seconds. Down, I say."

Sure enough, Geyser Joe, lolling carelessly in his saddle, was nevertheless holding the man's life under the surveillance of the muzzle of his sure-shooting revolver—and he meant every word he said.

The name of Geyser Joe was not altogether unknown there—and Dandy Darke was no stranger, as will appear. The man in the crowd after a moment's demur obeyed the stern order.

"Now," said Burke, turning to Darke and Faro Frank, "I kiver ye both—mebbe ye've heard su'thin' ov my shootin' an' won't try no frolicsome games on me—peel and wade in."

Meantime Marion Blake had stepped a little back, and watched the prowess of her champion with delight. For Faro Frank she had conceived a thorough hatred, mixed with loathing and fear, and delicate woman though she seemed to be, she would have been willing to see that dashing sport receive almost any amount of punishment. Her own peculiar position was, for the time, forgotten. Her personal troubles and dangers were lost in the thrilling excitement of the moment.

A touch on her shoulder recalled her to herself and she turned with outraged dignity upon the person who had dared to insult her.

To her surprise, and even delight, she looked into the face of a handsome girl, of about her own age. It was Lalaree—or Maud Burke—who spoke in gentle tones, and with the pure accent of one who had received some education:

"Come away, miss. There is going to be trouble here and you can prevent it no longer, though it would have begun long ago but for your presence. This is no place for you, since probably you would be one of the first to stop a bullet. Let us slip away and my friends will find us after it is over."

"But who are you and who are your friends?"

"Yonder man, who now calls himself Geyser Joe, is my father, and I suppose I may say that the man who faces that desperado is a friend. I am Maud Burke, and as I too am a lonely girl in this outlaws' refuge I think we may be friends."

Marion needed no further urging, but suffered herself to be drawn away, and their departure was scarcely observed. When they had got a little distance from the crowd Maud continued:

"I am a stranger here, as we have but just arrived at High Pine; but I know much of mines and miners. I heard something of what

that man said to you, and saw the body of him who seemed to be your only friend. Can you not repeat to me in few words, your story? If I am not mistaken there is something to be done, and at once."

It did not take many words to put Maud in full possession of all that Miss Blake knew.

"And you believe that this mine is valuable, and you wish to hold it to the end?"

"Yes."

"Then come quickly. There is not a moment to lose. We must find where the shaft is, and take possession at once; if it be not too late."

"What, we? Better to call upon your father. I dare trust him as my agent if he will only serve as such."

"He cannot come—in an hour it might be useless."

"But will you leave him in such a strait?"

Maud smiled sternly, and then there came a look, fierce and deadly, into her midnight eyes.

"Such odds as he cannot meet my hand could not protect him against. If he falls my lot will be to avenge him. Come."

The idea of Lalaree was simple enough. The driver of the canvas-covered wagon in which Marion Blake had arrived, had allowed himself to become interested in the affair at arms which was transpiring, and his horses were still harnessed to the vehicle. To secure a guide to the go-down shaft was not a great difficulty. By stage they would go.

Her plan worked so well that almost before Marion comprehended it the two girls were dashing down a rugged mountain trail in the swaying conveyance, the driver swinging his whip to earn promised pay, the Mexican guide shouting, and Marion touching from time to time the revolver that she had unearthed from between the seat-cushions, where she had had it stowed during the journey, and which now she had just buckled around her waist.

"Here you are!" shouted the Jehu, as he drew up his horses with a sudden check, causing his passengers to lurch suddenly forward. But the girls quickly recovered their equilibrium, and sprung lightly from the stage.

They were just in time.

Faro Frank's emissary was there, and he came not alone, but with three or four men, all of them as hardened and reckless as their employer, only not quite so skillful with card and pistol.

We have said that the two partners had taken the precaution to defend the go-down shaft with a stockade. It was a rude affair, and unless watched was of no great strength, since an agile man could climb over it at almost any point; but it would serve the purpose of a shelter very well, and garrisoned by a few resolute men, who knew how to handle their weapons, it became a fort hard to take. Just at the gateway two men were seated, amicably engaged in a game of cards, for work had stopped for the day, and had it not been for the presentiment of Sacramento Sam these men, after the funeral would have been at High Pine also. But, as their pay went on, they were content to remain on guard.

Nothing disturbed their quiet game for half an hour when suddenly looking up as a shadow fell across their hands, they saw before them, at not ten paces' distance, four men with pistols in their hands, the leader of whom, seeing that they were discovered stepped a pace forward, and as though at a signal of command each man poised his weapon with thoughtful deliberation.

"Waltz out ov thar; put yer hands above yer heads an' waltz right out! I'm ther sheriff ov this hyar camp, actin' under ther orders of ther alca'de, legally constitooted, an' I've come to take possession of this hyar Go-down shaft in ther name ov ther law. Be yer goin' to buck ag'in' it, say? If yer is, ther law 'll chaw yer up an' spit out ther bones afore yer kin raise yer horns."

No wonder the question was asked, since the two men had dropped their cards and sprung to their feet, with clinched fists and threatening looks. Very foolishly they had unloosed their belts and deposited their arms on a log that was not far distant, but to reach which seemed to mean certain death. They would scarcely risk the leap to get them, and yet they were not the men to quietly give in.

"You lie, Jack Bunker. You ain't no sheriff, fur High Pine would hang sich a thing, ef anybody was fool enough to try to turn him out. Every man is his own sheriff, an' you're nothin' but a bloody claim-jumper. Ef the boss comes back an' finds you cavortin' 'round hyar thar'll be about four dead ducks. Nary ounce will you ever h'iste out of this shaft."

As he spoke Joe Beams was edging, inch by inch, toward his weapons.

"None of that, Joe. You know me. Cave, er say the word. In ten seconds ye'r' both dead men."

"Hold on, then, I cave. Come in if yer want to."

And Joe Beams caught his comrade by the arm and pulled him away from the log where their arms were tantalizingly visible.

"Now ye'r' shoutin'," exclaimed the leader of the four, and with a motion to his men stepped forward, the others following closely at his heels.

But Beams's submission was only a ruse to throw the claim-jumpers off their guard. Just as they were passing within the gateway, Joe and his comrade sprung forward like tigers, and each struck out straight from the shoulder.

Before the blows the two men went down as if they had been shot; and Beams now sprung toward the weapons. Had it not been for an accident he would doubtless have gained them, and with revolver in either hand would perhaps have been a match for the startled claim-jumpers.

Unfortunately his foot struck against one of the men on the ground, he stumbled and fell, and the two men left standing, leaping lightly over him, dashed through, and careless of their comrades, seized the great gate of puncheons, and slamming it to, laid in place a heavy bar. Then they looked calmly through a loop-hole at the fist-fight that was going on. One of the men within was Jack Bunker, and he had won the stockade.

CHAPTER XI.

MUSCLE AGAINST MUSCLE—THE RED SPORT TAKES A HAND.

GEYSER JOE, sitting with both moccasined feet dangling from the same side of his horse, and with a revolver in each hand, was a referee from whose decision but one class of appeal could be made—that with lead and steel.

Nor was he the sole person in the crowd upon whom Dandy Darke had to depend for fair play. There were others who, either out of admiration of him, or hate of Faro Frank and the men who trained with him, would have willingly aided him in a pinch, and their voices encouraged the handsome young sport as he drew off his coat and handed it and his hat to a man who seemed willing to accept the charge. But he stepped back to Geyser Joe with his weapons, and that worthy whipped them under his leg in an instant.

Then, with a cold smile on his face, the young man sprung once more in front of Faro Frank, this time throwing up his hands in a scientific position, and the battle was joined.

Each man was a picture of fine physical development, though neither was above medium height. With swelling muscles, broad chests and keen eyes for an instant they faced each other, and instead of the prelude of hand-shaking that usually begins a display of the manly art, each one ran the other over with a glance that took in the other's points and sought for any weakness in the other's harness. Meantime, the crowd overlooking the blooming condition of Dandy Darke, that gave promise of staying power and capacity to endure, remembered only the acknowledged science of the gambler that they had more than once seen employed upon men that were giants in comparison with himself, and as he stripped the larger man, they felt, some with a shiver of regret, others with a thrill of delight, that the chances of Darke for victory, or even life, were slender.

"Two to one on Faro Frank—any one a-takin' ov me up to a hundred?" yelled one sympathizer, and a big rough in a red shirt, waved his battered hat above his head to show where he lived.

No one accepted the challenge, however, and at the moment there was a whip-like crack, and Dandy Darke sprung back to recover from a sharp, quick chopper that Faro Frank had thrown in like lightning.

"Bu'st him, Frank!" howled the man in the red shirt. "Sail right in, ole lemon-squeezer, you've got him! Five to one on Faro Frank, an' no takers. Hi-yi-yaah!"

A perfect ring, some fifteen feet in diameter, had been formed by this time, at one side of which on horseback sat Geyser Joe, the self-appointed referee, still grasping his revolvers, and a troubled look came into his eye at this first rebuff.

But there was method in Dandy Darke. He had accepted a slight punishment to gain an end. Again he slid quietly into distance, and again with a guard that seemed destined but partially to protect his face. Again he made a feint with his left hand, and once more Faro Frank's return shot out, quick and vicious, and without a thought of failure to connect.

It was this self-confidence that Darke had tried to give to the gambler.

With his left arm he caught the blow that this time was given not only from the shoulder out, but with the weight of Faro Frank's body following it.

The skillful parry of the heavy blow half-wheeled the gambler around, just as Darke, in perfect time, threw out his right fist and shoulder in one crushing counter, that, landing on the cheek, hurled Frank to the ground like a nine-pin.

Then Dandy Darke stepped back toward Burke, and standing with his magnificent arms folded over his broad chest, gazed at his antagonist with the same cold smile, never even glancing at the crowd, from which arose more than one cheer.

The blow was a stout one. A shade late for a counter, a trifle early for a return, it had the power of the one and the precision of the other. And Dandy Darke could just as well as not have sent the blow in a little higher up; but he did not want to end the struggle in a single round. So, though the stroke had cut his cheek open as though with a knife, and shaken him greatly, Faro Frank was not knocked senseless, but almost immediately sprung to his feet, with wild rage that was demoniacal, though he was silent as the tomb. His uncut cheek was actually livid, his jaws worked together as though grinding the flesh of a victim, and his eyes gleamed like twin coals of fire.

He glared at Dandy Darke; but in no bewildered way, for he felt to the bottom of his soul that he had met his equal in science and his master in strategy. How hard a hitter he was he had just felt. This was a fight not to be won in an instant, and he would have to call all his resources into play.

"Time!" shouted Geyser Joe, from his perch, and as more than half a minute had elapsed since the blow had been struck, without hesitation the pugilists stepped firmly toward each other.

This time Faro Frank held his guard well up, his body bent forward, his attitude that of a man who was going, on the first provocation, to shift out of reach, to avoid punishment. Though Darke tried him once or twice in a careless way his blows were neatly stopped; but the returns in the same way fell short. As, at last, a tremendous shot hit from Darke, came booming out, Faro Frank ducked his head, and bounded in, striking with his elbow a severe blow in Dandy Darke's ribs, and the next moment had him fairly across his hip.

A roar went up from the crowd. Faro Frank broke bones when he threw a cross buttock, and not a soul there but thought the dandy young sport was gone. If the gambler's face could have been fairly seen one would have known that he thought so too, and under his mustache he muttered:

"Ah, curses on you! I have—"

He had every nerve braced for a supreme effort; threw every muscle into one wave of strength as he spoke; but he spoke too soon.

Up into the air flew Dandy Darke—but not at his bidding. At the instant that he applied the wrench, Darke, whose knees had been well bent

under him, sprung with the strain, and fairly flung a somerset straight out from between Faro Frank's hands, lighting like a feather immediately facing him, with hands well up for attack or defense.

But Faro Frank was, in ring parlance, all abroad, since again the strategic science of the young sport had baffled him. As he glared around, shaking his head like an enraged bull, Darke stepped firmly in on his left foot, slinging out shoulder and fist, his body dropping in cadence with the stroke, and his hand catching Frank upon the brow.

For the second time he hunted the ground—for the second time Dandy Darke stepped quietly back. There was a little flush on his bronzed cheek—that was all the change.

But there was a change in his antagonist. He was no longer the natty sport, smiling if sardonic. From cuts on cheek and brow the blood had spouted, covering his face and dripping upon his clothing. Though strong as ever on his pins, his head was already swollen, so that few at a glance could have recognized the man, save for the eyes that, untouched, were glowing with a baleful glare, such as always lighted them when he had sworn to slay.

"Curse your tricks!" he cried. "I will kill you yet. Stand up, if you be a man."

Again they drew near, and as they approached, from a cautious shift Faro Frank suddenly changed his advance to a headlong rush, and despising the one half-arm blow that landed on his head, he dashed direct for Dandy Darke's throat. No need to tell his fell purpose. If those iron fingers once got their grip they would hang with bulldog tenacity though they were hacked off one by one.

The two figures were locked together; they writhed and turned and twisted. Then Darke's grasp closed in like iron, and he tore the other half down, drawing him over his left knee, his left hand holding him steady, as if in a vise, while his right hand rose high in air to strike.

"Crack!"

A pistol-shot from an unseen hand in the crowd, and the positions were reversed.

Down dropped Dandy Darke; and up, with an oath, leaped Faro Frank.

With one bound he snatched a knife from the belt of the nearest one in the crowd. With another bound he leaped upon the motionless body.

From without the ring there was an oath and a scramble.

The same bullet that had stricken down Darke had passed on, and touched lightly the animal on which, with his whole soul centered with intense eagerness on the fight Geyser Joe was sitting. Just when, to back his comrade, he was most needed, he was wanting. His horse gave an impatient, angry bound, and Burke and his revolvers slid heavily to the ground. Just as he was gathering himself up Faro Frank was crouched upon Darke's body, with gleaming knife upraised, snarling out like a savage tiger striking its fangs at its victim's throat.

"This for your heart!"

The crowd surged in nearer to the combatants, some in fiendish glee, a few in actual horror at

the sudden, deadly reversal of fortune. But in all that number there seemed no one man willing to interfere. They lived in High Pine.

"Wa-hoop! hoop, hoop la!"

With a yell one man acted—and he from the very outside of the crowd, where he had been struggling to get in.

He hesitated no longer. Placing his hands upon the shoulders of two men he forced them violently apart, and then raising his knees he suddenly slung himself violently into the air, feet foremost, and went sailing over the heads of the ranks in front of him. Lightly he struck the ground, and then, with the wild cry, he sprung once more, again with feet foremost, striking full against Faro Frank, whose knife was just trembling on the fall.

The crash hurled the gambler a dozen feet, with the breath completely knocked out of his body, while the strange and unexpected apparition, whipped deftly out of his belt a brace of shining revolvers. With both hands extended, and his coal-black eyes glaring fiercely around, he stood over Dandy Darke, exclaiming:

"Me big Injun sport; me white man's friend, fur rocks. Who call hand on Scarlet Bear? Waugh!"

At any other time a roar of laughter would have gone up; but the situation was too serious just then. The red-shirted man who had offered ten to two on Faro Frank was stealthily edging his way into the crowd; but at once, on him, one of the revolvers turned.

"Go slow, red-shirt, bad man! Me holdy drop, an' shoot like debbil, much. You hear me?"

The man in the red shirt paused to contemplate, with his hands held out in a ridiculous way, to show that they were guiltless of weapon. At the same time with a gasp, Dandy Darke drew up his limbs, and then, dazedly assumed a sitting posture, rubbing the top of his head with his hand, which he then looked at in a confused sort of way.

"Creased, by heavens!" he muttered. "Right in a minute!"

True it was that the bullet had plowed marvelously near to a fatal track. But luck, if we dare call such things luck, was in our hero's favor, and the result was only a brief unconsciousness.

He staggered to his feet, and glared around with rapidly clearing eyes.

"Hyer's yer tools, pard; catch 'em!" shouted Geyser Joe, who had been forgotten from the time he fell.

As he spoke he tossed his revolvers to Dandy Darke, who caught them with marvelous dexterity.

Now then, hyer's three chiefs holdin' this camp. The first man that draws drops. Who calls ther turn?"

Back to back braced the three men, defiance bristling in every hair and for a few seconds a deathlike silence hung in the air.

"Hold it! Nobody says you sha'n't. Best thing we kin do is to wipe up Frank. When he kems to mebbe there'll be a new deal. Afore that time you kin be forty thousand chiefs, ef you want to; but thet red nigger thet kicked the faro sharp hed better waltz right out town.

High Pine's a hot ole hole, an' afore he knows it he'll be roastin'."

So, at length, spoke the man in the red shirt and two or three men joined him in picking up the defeated man, and bearing him away.

And scarcely had the hum of a hundred voices begun to arise when there dashed up a hatless man on a horse which had evidently been hastily cut from some kind of a vehicle. It was Joe Beams, foreman of the workmen of Go-down shaft, mounted on one of the stage horses.

"Hello, thar," he shouted. "Thar's work fur wages. Whar's Sam? Some condemned galoots hes jumped our shaft."

"What shaft is that!" called out Joe, without thinking of any possible interest he could have in the affair.

"The Go-down Shaft—Sacramento Sam's. They fired us out, an' I've come fur help. That Jack Bunker heads 'em, the reckless devil, an' he'll murder the two women that jist kim thar!"

"Hear that, pard! Into the saddle with yer. Sam ain't round, but lead ther way, an' we'll back 'em to ther last gasp. Back yer go! You h'ar me shout?"

Joe Beams said nothing, but wheeled his horse, and toward the Go-down Shaft three horsemen recklessly galloped, while the Indian sport, with a hand now touching one, again the other, kept in the line, side by side.

And in their rear, more or less tailed off, came half the population of High Pine, anxious to see the fun.

CHAPTER XII.

CHARLEY BLAKE'S SISTER TAKES POSSESSION.

WHEN Joe Beams saw that the capture of the mine had been accomplished, he fairly howled with rage.

But there was no help for it. Two of the jumpers were within. He had struggled away from his man a shade too late to even attempt to defeat the maneuver, and those that had been knocked down were already up and handling their weapons. If he only had the tools so tantalizingly resting upon the log, he would have held them a fight yet, for Joe Beams, when excited, was one whom no two men could make take water.

The weapons were there; and he was here. No standing helpless, to be picked off, for him. Sam must know.

For the first time he saw the stage, drawn up at some little distance. The girls had sprung out, and the men had followed them to see what was in the wind. To take out a horse was the unthinking work of a minute, and off he went like the wind toward High Pine.

Marion Blake was no coward, as the reader can very well judge, since all alone, and at the cost of almost her last available dollar, she had made the journey to High Pine on learning, by lucky chance, that her brother had been dangerously wounded. She lacked experience of contact with the ruder elements of humanity, though all her life she and Charley had experienced the buffeting that always falls to the lot of orphan children, however fortunate they may be. With one to lead she had a dauntless cour-

age that could be relied on, as Maud Burke more than guessed.

Nor was she disappointed. With a glance she took in the scene, and then flew forward, calling upon Marion to follow her.

At the gate stood Jack Bunker peeping through at the men without; and he saw Joe Beams gallop away with a curse, for he knew that he had gone to make an effort to raise the camp.

As certain as man could be of what was to happen, that Sacramento Sam was dead, there was a bare prospect that it might be Faro Frank that would be taken in, and in that contingency things would soon be very sultry for himself. All the same he had named his price and was willing to stand by his bargain. If he did not, Faro Frank would be after him. After watching the flight of Beams his intention was to admit his other two allies, and so, for a wonder he did not see the rushing forms of the two girls, that had already passed out of line when he first got a glimpse of the canvas-covered wagon. The sight of the driver and Mexican was unpleasant enough, though they stood far off.

While the man by his side menaced the partner of Beams with leveled pistol, Bunker cautiously raised the bar and opened the gate.

"Come in, quick, boys, we must barricade here. Frank will be down a-hoopin', though, ez soon ez he gits his share of ther job wiped up."

"We shoot if you look up. Down with your pistols, and open that gate! The first man that raises his eyes will die."

The ringing tones of Lalaree fell upon Joe Bunker's ears with startling clearness—and at the same time he heard the cocking of pistols, and knew that on the stockade above him some one was perched, with weapons at hand to enforce the mandate. If he was only looking that way it would be so easy to pick him, or her, off. But he was not looking up, so the advantage was on the other side.

"Hold on!" he said. "Don't ye go fur to come sich games. I ain't a-lookin'; but you can't shoot me an' my pards outside both, an' fu'st thing yer know you'll drap."

"The first man outside that raises a head gets a bullet. Come on, Tom, and you, stranger. Relieve these villains of their weapons, while we hold them in check."

It was Marion that this time spoke, and very brave and clear sounded her voice. No one would suspect that inwardly she was quaking with fear, though she was not afraid of firearms, being a more than fair shot, considering the amount of practice that she had had.

Well was it that she had at least the courage to speak, since it was the second voice that saved the day.

"Holy mither!" exclaimed one of the outsiders, ducking the head that he had begun to raise.

"Sure, an' there's two ov thim, an' both ov them leddies. Arrah now be aisy, me darlints, it's not fur ther loikes ov you to blow off the top ov Mike Flinnigan's head. Put down the deadly weapon, an' let's raison together. Sure it's a shtick oi'd sooner have in me fisht than a shootin'-oirn, which I don't like at all, at all."

"Hold yer tongue, yer blatherin loon," shouted back Bunker. "I'm running this ranch."

"And you'll run out of it in a minute more; or go out on a pair of pick-handles," sternly interposed Maud.

"But who be ye? What right have you to interfere?"

"I am Marion Blake, the sister of Charley Blake, and his only heir. Sacramento Sam is dead, too, and bequeathed his share to me. I shall work this mine hereafter; let who will try to hinder. I take possession now—leave at once."

Again Marion's voice was heard; and after she ceased speaking there was a brief lull and silence, broken only by the sound of approaching horses at no great distance.

"Curses on it, if that be Faro Frank, and he finds us corraled by a woman, what will he say?"

It was not Faro Frank.

The interlopers approached from a direction quite contrary to that of High Pine, and at their head galloped Murray Brant and his first henchman, Matt of the Mimbres. They halted not until they reached the stockade, and then looked with some surprise at the scene—two girls at bay, holding a group of brawny men in check. Maud Burke was even threatening:

"These men coming are friends, but it makes no difference. At the first hostile movement of yours we fire."

"What is this, what is this?" queried Brant, in his oiliest of tones.

"Both bowers an' the ace in our hands, an' euchered at last! Ain't that square enough? This hyar claim hain't a legittymate owner, an' me an' the boys sot out to jump her, fer they say ther's a power of the ore to be had fer the takin' outer Go-down shaft. We jumped it, fa'r an' squar' an' then su'tbin' that talks, like two painters in a pettycoat, jumped us. Thet's it, eggzsactly. Thet's biz. We jump out. 'Tain't my fun'ral any more, so settle with ther undertaker among ye—boys, git up an' git."

"Yes, get up and get. It is the best thing you can do. Of course we would have to see that these brave young ladies came to no harm; and they might, even in their awkwardness, do you serious harm. Have no fears, my dear young lady. We will protect you to the last."

"So's a mule's hind legs awk'ard—to fool about. I reckon she's ez handy with ther trigger ez ther tongue. I'd sooner back a cat hop in Faro Frank's brace game than hev her pull on me. So long! We're a-goin'."

And they went. As the discomfited hero passed grumbling through the gate, Lalaree leaped lightly down *within* the stockade, followed by Marion, and calling in the two men, she hastily closed the barrier.

"Now then, talk!" she exclaimed, "but, Miss Blake, beware of him. He and I have met before. There is blood on his hands—the blood of one that was dear to me—and had I not made a pledge to the dying, I could slay him where he stands."

"Why, you little spitfire Injun, what do you mean? Miss Blake, if that be your name, this girl is no fit companion for you. I know you have not a thorough acquaintance with her, for

it is only a night or two ago that she stole away out of our camp in company with a desperado of the worst stamp, a known shooter and a suspected sluice-thief, and even outlaw and road-agent."

"Sir!" exclaimed Marion, indignantly, "she has befriended me when I needed a friend, and I refuse to listen to your insinuations."

"But listen, my dear young lady."

"I am listening, sir."

For once Murray Brant was in doubt what to say. This sudden meeting had made a confusion in his plans. The fact was that he knew a great deal about Go-down shaft, and something about the young lady who claimed it. The thing that most surprised him was, that Marion had not recognized him at once, as Lalaree had done.

"Do not be prejudiced by anything that this unworthy companion of yours may say. In the first place, she is a half-breed Indian with a smattering of education. Such people are always devils. In the next, believe me that I will be your friend—and if ever there was a poor child in need of a friend it is you, in the midst of the devils of High Pine."

"I do. Indeed I do!"

The cry burst from the depths of the heart of lovely Marion, and for the moment she felt drawn toward the smooth-speaking Brant.

"I come backed by a few good men, fully able to cope with any foes you may have, and intending to interest myself in the mining affairs of this camp. Let yourself be guided by me, and I assure you that your person and rights shall be protected if I have to die in your defense."

"Hyar too, little woman, hyar too!" interjected Mimbres Matt.

"Curse you, hush!" said Brant in a low tone. "Fall back. I want to carry on this interview alone."

Then again, in a louder key:

"Unbar your gate, my dear young lady. We will camp here to-night, so as to be near you for your defense, and in the morning will see what is to be done to put your mind at ease."

His wheedling voice and appearance so completely respectable as compared with the men she had seen at High Pine, won upon Marion. Her hand was already on the bar, when again Lalaree stepped between.

"Hold! I know you, Murray Brant, you have gold by the pound—but you are a bad man; your touch poison, your friendship disgrace. What would you do, Marion? I will slay him, but he shall not enter here."

Startled by the passionate outburst of her friend, Marion leaned against the heavy door, and gave through a loophole, a long and earnest look.

Then she started back, white and trembling.

Again from without the voice of Brant:

"Thrust her aside. She will drag you to ruin. Why do you hesitate?"

As he spoke he looked anxiously over his shoulder.

Marion hesitated no more.

"No!" she cried, in a tone of ringing defiance. "Where were my eyes? I too know you, and you shall not, dare not enter here,

Away, sir! Stand aside, or take the consequences."

"Curses on my luck that made me persecute her. I have offended her mortally. Nothing but force will ever win her now. Ho, there, Matt! bring up your men."

As the men came forward at his call, and Malcolm Dane placed himself by his side, he addressed Marion once more; but now his suavity was all gone.

"I have offered you your own terms, suggested that I would accept any compromise. Now I appeal to brute force to sustain the majesty of the law. We own this mine. It is situate on a tract that is included in an old Mexican land grant, the title of which has come to us. Once and for all I demand your surrender."

"And I declare that you shall not enter while we live. Your grant is a fraud. I am the owner, and will protect my rights to the death!"

"Then we will move upon the works!" said Brant, grimly, and with pistol in hand he led his men toward the stockade.

This was no holiday parade, either. The men in the party were picked fighters, and they came to fight.

But as they gathered for a rush, three newcomers burst upon the scene.

"Stand there! Another step and we fire!"

Looking hastily around, Murray Brant saw that they had now to deal with men.

Geyser Joe, Dandy Darke, Joe Beams and the Indian sport covered their party with cocked revolvers in either hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIGH PINE PASSES.

ALTHOUGH Murray Brant and his men outnumbered the others, they were by no means slow to give heed to the warning, for there was a resolute air about the four that said experience and business. While Matt and his men hesitated, Dandy Darke and the other three sprung to the gate, which opened to receive them.

The garrison was reinforced, and now it would be stout hearts and hands that could wrest the Go-down shaft from its brave little mistress.

None too soon was the entry made; for High Pine was close at hand.

At least some score of men swaggered up to Brant, and greeted him with stares or surly questions.

"What's the racket? Who's been rubbed out down yere? Why don't you sail in if it ain't all chin-music? A man about High Pine means biz."

In answer to such expressions as these, both Brant and Malcolm Dane told their stories in a guarded sort of way.

Dane went a step further. He asked for aid, and as he talked some men listened. He was trying to organize an attack upon the mine, then and there. One repulsive-looking man, who seemed to be of note, was more interested than the rest—but interrupted finally:

"That's all talkee-talkee, chin-chin. Brace up an' tell us the size of the pile you'll spud out

fur the work. Got a thousand to spare fur the crowd? Then we'd shout."

"I can pay—when the work is done; but it's every man's duty to help the right. Why, I tell you, there's a double-dyed murderer there that should be seized. He threatened my own life, and shot down one of my men beside me."

"Wal—kill him!"

"But I don't want to kill him. I want him taken and handed over to the law."

The man laughed scornfully.

"The law! The law! Hyar's the law of High Pine." He drew a broad-bladed knife as he spoke. "Ef you don't shoot yer man on sight, d'ye think we'll chip in? Thar ain't a man hyar that ain't killed a dozen. Thankee fur playin' us fur flats; but ef you ain't goin' to show no fun we'll go back to High Pine. We don't rustle around that crowd in thar fur nothin'."

A couple more men had been carefully admitted by Joe Beams, and the little garrison were ready for either siege or instant fight, so discretion was really the better part of valor, as even Murray Brant decided. He was not certain yet of his surroundings, and as the latest comer was looked upon as an interloper, who, without Mimbres Matt and his sturdy followers, would be in some danger at the best. Accordingly he deferred the attack, and drawing aside, after a short conference, took up his line of march for High Pine, with the returning denizens.

Within the stockade little had yet been said, for the girls stood a little apart, while the men were ranged around for the defense of the walls, and it was only when the last loiterer had disappeared that there was a chance for any exchange of words.

The Indian sport from time to time had looked sharply at Lalaree, or Maud, as Geyser Joe almost always called her. He was a queer-looking object. Though a glance at his pronounced features showed him to be a full-blooded Indian, he was clad in the garments of a white man, and for the section of country rather fashionable garments at that, or they had been once upon a time. His coat and pants were of heavy black beaver cloth, and on his head, cocked upon one side, was a stiff plug hat, in the crown of which was crushed a deep dint. He was guiltless of a vest, but his broad breast was covered with a gayly flowered calico shirt, now sadly in need of a laundress; and around his waist there was a broad belt with a large, shining buckle, in which he carried a brace of revolvers and a knife. Over his temples his hair was plastered in long soap-locks, thus relieving the face which was otherwise destitute of hair. No young man was he; but age sits lightly on an Indian unbroken by fire-water or disease, and it was hard to say at a glance whether he was thirty, or twice that age.

Lalaree seemed a puzzle to him. Her dress, speech and manners were white, her straight, lithe figure, and the dark beauty of her face, showed a dash of aboriginal blood. Who was she? Was Geyser Joe her father? He seemed to be, from the glances that passed between the two. He turned away, silent,

When the last of the High Pines had gone, Marion went straight to Dandy Darke, and extended her hand.

"How can I thank you—a perfect stranger, for your gallant efforts in my behalf?"

"You are not a perfect stranger," he answered bluntly. "I have seen you a score of times at a distance—once, nearer, though I was but a boy then."

"Ah!"

She looked at him again.

"What! You? Yes, I am not mistaken. It was your arm that was around me that dreadful night when the Golden Day foundered. Why did you never come to me again, after you had seen me in safety? Did you forget me so soon, or is your life so full of noble deeds that you care not to see again those you have succored?"

"Lady, I could never forget you, and I would have seen you again had it been for the best. But my life has been a fateful one, swung hither and thither as the wind of destiny blew. In youth deeply wronged, then dwelling for a time among savages, then tried in the refining fires of a cruel world, I have roamed far, for I have a mission to perform, which now seems near its end. I know, I believe, the exact work that I have to do, and had not something held my hand the end would now be almost in sight. If I have aided you I am glad. You can count on me to the last drop in my veins. If I was less of a desperate man your safety would be less assured! Forget my past if you can, and only look upon me as one devoted to your service."

She held his hand while he spoke with a glad, confident look upon her face. The young man who had twice saved her, once from death and once from insult, might be pardoned for a multitude of sins. She murmured her thanks, and for a little while they conversed in an undertone. Then he turned toward the Indian, who stood apart, with arms folded, apparently taking no interest in his surroundings.

"Yonder is Red Bear, an old, tried friend of mine. I must speak with him, and then we will consult with you about what you had best do, for I take it you intend, though the risk is fearful, to hold on to this mine. The man Burke—or Geyser Joe, is an old miner, and will be just the man to aid you."

Then he passed over and extended his hand to the Indian—who greeted him with a pleased, "How!"—while Marion turned to seek Geyser Joe.

A wonderful stock of modesty seemed that man to have. He held down his head like a shame-faced school-boy, and extended his hand as though it was to receive a beating, answering Marion in a thick, mumbling sort of voice.

"Thankee, miss; Maud an' me is about es squar' as you find 'em, an' I see she'd be good company hyar fur ye, so I don't say I won't drop into yer plan; but I'd sooner scout 'round a day er so till ver see if this yere Joe Beams can't fill yer bill. I'm goin' up to High Pine fu'st thing to look arter Sam's body. He orter be buried right hyer, an' ef you's not objectin', we'll bring ther corpse along down."

"True, true. But will you risk yourself there after what has happened?"

He raised his eyebrows and shoulders in a deprecating sort of way.

"I'm allers on ther risk. An' to sarve you I'd polka right inter a den o' mount'in lions, with nothin' but a willer switch. I'll be a chief in High Pine, er I'll be a funeral procesh, corpse, gospel-sharp and mourners all rolled into one."

"But your daughter—would you leave her?"

"She's a good leetle girl, miss, not o' my kind, but the good Lord'll take keer ov her when I go under, an' thar's somethin' in the bank at Frisco. I love her, in course, but suthin' drives me on an' I can't stop. Watch after her, an' you'll find her true. I must be goin'."

The rest of the men had looked after the stage and horses, and Geyser Joe, adjusting his belt, stepped out from the stockade and on foot, and alone strode up the hillside toward the camp.

In regard to the body of Sacramento Sam he was good as his word, for it was brought to the shaft that night; but for himself—he came not, though more than one within the stockade looked anxiously for his return.

On the morrow, work once more began. A little cabin was erected near the quarters of the miners for the two girls, and the Go down shaft resumed the activity that had been interrupted.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MINUTE MORE OF LIFE.

FOR nearly a week did affairs run smoothly in and about the Go-down shaft, and Mr. Darke, as the young ladies called him, had made several incursions into the lair at High Pine, always returning in safety, and giving no sign that he had met with any noteworthy adventures. He was the actual head of affairs at the mine, young though he was, for of Geyser Joe nothing had been seen, and in his judgment Marion was learning to rely with a sublime confidence, and to think her future fortune was secure. Of course she did not intend to tarry there forever; but she had no idea of leaving until she was definitely fixed in her title, or had been ejected. This latter contingency she failed to consider very closely. Brant and his partner had as yet made no show, and though they sometimes entered her thoughts, the girl-miner and hopes that they had been frightened away, an impression that Darke did not attempt to disturb.

But Dandy Darke knew, all the same, that the big fish was only lying silent in the pool until a favorable time for a rush; and though he said nothing he was keeping his eye upon him. Brant would probably have heard from him before this had it not been that he was now anxious not to give any excuse to raise the camp on Marion, whose cause had become his own, spite of its interference with his plans.

He expected trouble with Faro Frank, too; but fortunately several of that worthy's ribs were broken; and as he had implored his friends to save the young sport for him, Darke remained unmolested, and moved through the camp at

will, though he watched every man there like a hawk. There was one, at least, who he knew was only biding his time, and that man he himself was hunting down. It was Natan Argado, the brother of the slain Felipe.

Probably there were a score of High Piners in the "Star" one evening, when the young man came in. As he passed through the door a man going out slyly whispered: "Look out, stranger, they're layin' fur ye."

"Thank you, my friend," thought he, but said nothing, and strode on in and threw himself upon a rude seat made of a rough puncheon.

For a time he was utterly neglected. There was no one in the room that he knew, and he kept on waiting, for he had an idea that sooner or later he should see some one.

Sure enough he was not mistaken, for soon in came Brant, Dane and one or two others.

By this time Brant had ingratiated himself pretty well. Without bleeding much he made promises to help to develop their resources and start a rush. When they began to understand that he was Murray Brant, the well-known speculator, who had, without a doubt, the power to do what he said, and that he had a body-guard who would allow of no foolishness, they were more than willing to tie to him.

At sight of Dane, the young sport started, as though about to rise, but controlled himself by an effort, and watched the party as they ranged in front of the rough bar. Before very long his presence was noted and Brant catching his eye, beckoned with his finger.

Without a moment's hesitation he arose and approached.

"Well, young man, from what I hear you're a brave one, and if I could patch up the quarrel between you and one of my Mexicans I wouldn't mind finding a place for you."

"I've place enough at the end of my own paddle; and when that paddle drops it will be apt to hit some of your crowd. I've nothing with you yet as I know of, so you'd better not trouble yourself about the size of my hand."

"Come, come. You stick to the girl like a good one; but you're backing the wrong side. She had better give in peaceably. In ten days there will be a battalion of United States cavalry here, and I will be placed in possession of the property which is undoubtedly ours. I don't want to let loose these tigers of High Pine or I would have been in before now. Take advice, young man, and tie to me."

"Thankee for nothing. If these soldiers are coming so fast you don't want me; and if they don't come Miss Blake might want me in case those animiles *did* escape. No, sir, I've no love for you; and there's a man with you I hate. I've told him so and I don't know what prevents my shooting him on sight."

"What is there between him and you?" asked Brant, coolly eying Dane as he spoke, who was white from the roots of the hair on his forehead to where his neck was lost under his clothing.

"Ask him. He knows and can answer, unless his coward heart refuses to speak."

"Who are you? Why is it that Dane fears you as I never knew him to fear mortal man?"

"He fears me because I am a fated avenger."

If he will draw now and here he shall have his chance; but I have the bullet ready run that one day will take his life!"

"You crow too loud—I want you to listen to reason. This thing must be settled now; but not in the way you speak of. Both of us cannot remain here, and as I want to stay you must emigrate. Either swear that this quarrel is to end and you will cease to interfere in my affairs, or leave this camp, or *die*. You have your choice. Answer, quick."

"None of the three. You nor your gang can drive me. You're a fool to talk to me like that without a pistol in your hand, cocked and ready."

As he spoke Dandy Darke leaned carelessly against the corner of the bar, with a smile on his face, but his hands were ready to grip his ready revolvers.

"I'll tell you what kind of a man I am," answered Brant, in a cool concentrated tone, and pulling out his watch. "I'll give you just one minute to leave this ranch and three to get out of camp. If you're not gone when I close this watch at the end of the minute you're a corpse. I sha'n't speak again. The time begins."

An intense silence pervaded the room. The High Piners grouped together just a little out of range with Brant.

Not a sound was heard but the suppressed breathing of the men, and the tick, tick of Brant's watch.

The excitement was intense.

What was about to happen?

Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty seconds flew by.

Murray Brant calmly eyed his watch, Malcolm Dane stood back white and trembling. Something or other still kept his tongue tied. Yet there was much of horror on his face.

Dandy Darke had his arms folded in apparent carelessness, but his fingers were ready, and he knew that he could draw and fire before any man there.

Fifty-five seconds gone. Murray Brant made a motion as if to close his watch—and at that instant Dandy Darke suddenly pulled a pistol, and, apparently without taking aim, fired directly over his shoulder. Then, without looking after his shot—for he never failed—he wheeled half-way round and confronted Brant and his crowd, with a weapon in either hand.

And from the direction of his shot there came a shadowy sort of cry, a gasp, and the noise of a fall.

"He is a devil!" gasped Brant, staggering back.

Yet, in a certain sense, it was only luck. Behind the bar, against the rough wall, there was tacked a sort of looking-glass. A thousand times it might all have passed without notice—yet Dandy Darke felt a sudden impulse to see what was behind him, though he knew no one was in that part of the room. He gave a quick glance at the glass—and saw at a window the lowering face of Natan, the Mexican, looking along a carbine, leveled at him. When the minute was up he would fire.

Then Dandy Darke pulled a pistol, and taking his aim from the glass, fired a snap shot over his shoulder that brought the Mexican down.

"Now!" he cried, facing his foes. "Draw, or get!"

They knew there was no foolishness about him; and that a movement toward weapons might mean certain death for at least two of the number.

"I'm going, young man, but the next chance will be mine. Look out for yourself. Before the week ends you will be a dead man."

With his men at his heels he turned and went out, followed by Malcolm Dane, who was still shivering and silent.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MASSACRE UNVAILED.

BRANT and his party were camped at the edge of High Pine in fairly comfortable quarters. Two huts were there, one of which was occupied by Mimbres Matt and the men; the other exclusively by Murray Brant and Malcolm Dane.

On coming out from the den, Brant had turned to Matt of the Mimbres, who was somewhat bewildered at the way things were going.

"You had better gather up the fragments, and put him in a hole somewhere, and then go on up to Cal's and see if that Faro Frank has keeled over again. He was to have been down here to-night, and if he had kept his word we would hardly have been beaten out so. Come to the tent in an hour, and I'll give you orders for the night."

With this, Brant and Dane strode silently toward their quarters, and soon were alone together.

"Curses on the dingy old place! it's worth a fortune to spend a week in such a hole. If it wasn't for the girl, I'd burn you and your Mexican land-grant, and get back to some place where a white man can live."

He lit a lantern, set it with a thump on the floor, after lighting a pipe at its flame, and threw himself down upon the blankets in one corner, saying:

"Devil take you, man, what are you glum about? You look like Jonah in the ark—I'll be cursed if you're not dead weight enough to sink the whole tea party."

"I don't like it; that's all."

"To be bearded by a boy? No more do I. But that's nothing. Mister boy will expire shortly. I'll lay for him again. Natan had such a spite at him that I thought he would bring him sure. And I knew I could trust Natan. He and Felipe were with me a dozen years back. I don't mind telling it to you, as you won't learn much now about it. Of all my friends of those days there's only a couple left. That road-agent that was shot by the man that calls himself Burke, was one of them, and so was his lieutenant. That was the reason they didn't stop me and I didn't molest them. Curse them and curse Burke: I wouldn't care if all of them were dead."

"Why?"

"Know too much. It's an awful strain to have old-time pards come peddling your secrets round. May make no end of trouble. And, by the way, it strikes me that this Dandy Darke knows something about yours. He'll kill you if you don't kill him, and I can't see why you

don't do it. What's the trouble between you?"

"A mistake, that is all."

"What kind of a mistake?"

"He connects me with something that happened in Kansas a dozen years ago this month. He lost his mother and father and the little remnant of their fortune. I came up to the scene the next day, and it was a sight to make angels weep."

"Brant gave a long whistle.

"Boy saw you, did he?"

"No, but he heard of it."

"Ah! the infernal fool has the wrong pig by the ear; but I hope he'll hold on. My luck again. He got all the rest down fine. I wonder how it comes he didn't drop to—"

Brant suddenly ceased his soliloquy. He had already said much more than he had intended to. And yet he hardly thought that Dane, who had followed the conversation with aversion, had heard him.

He had, and sprung up in some excitement.

"Listen, and know the truth. That boy is Dane Dorland, my own sister's son, though never before the other night had I seen him. I sought his father for years to slay him, as he now seeks me. I trailed him down—though I would have struck him only in open fight. I found only his corpse. But all the same, I have wronged him. The title to the Mexican land-grant should be his; it was a neglected, forgotten part of his father's fortune."

"I see. You want to weaken."

"Well, I have fallen low down. I could rob the boy of his patrimony; but I find I've got a heart somewhere, and I cannot stand the idea of that girl down the gulch falling into your clutches."

"I see. 'Bless you, my children, take each other and the land-grant and be happy.' The boy must die."

"You are a devil."

"You're a long time finding it out. I can't have that boy and Blake on *my* trail."

"Who?"

"Blake—"

"Who is Blake? Not the girl?"

"No, the man that calls himself Burke. I have found the men who will attend to the job."

"You shall not. I begin to suspect—"

"What?"

"That you know something of the massacre."

"Ha. ha!"

"Laugh if you will, but by heavens your face is strangely like that I met once at a crossing of the Big Blue, and that man was—"

"Who?"

"A jayhawker and a bandit!"

"Beware what you say. The very walls have ears. I want no gossip of my past life if it costs a million."

"I tell you I know you. Good God! could I have joined hands with the murderer of my sister?"

The men were on their feet in a moment. There were oaths and loud words uttered and then suddenly the two men clinched, in a fierce hand-to-hand struggle, for Dane was in reality half wild with the conflicting emotions raised by his nephew.

It lasted but a moment and then the two fell apart; but Malcolm Dane dropped heavily to the ground, and Brant, after one glance rushed from the cabin, leaving a knife sticking in his partner's breast, which he believed had reached his heart.

Hardly had the murderer disappeared when a dark form crept up to the threshold.

"Shall I give the villains a call?" he muttered; and listened.

Within there sounded a hollow groan. It might be a trick but he believed not. When it was repeated he entered boldly.

Malcolm Dane lay writhing upon the floor.

"Hello! This looks like murder. Let's see."

He held the lantern down and recognized the victim, whose eyes just then opened and were fixed upon him.

"Dorland!" he whispered.

The young man stooped down in some trepidation, "I had thought my hand would have done this work, doubly-dyed murderer. As it has not, I can pity you. I am your sister's son—and you slew her and my father, you and your Kansas outlaws."

"False!" gasped the man. "I was on the trail but I came after it was over. The man who slew me was their leader. Blake was another—Geyser Joe."

Dandy Darke as he has heretofore been called, uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Yes, you got all the rest, but their secret has been kept until now. You would slay them? Well? Avenge me too. I am going. First feel this breast pocket. He forgot my papers. They were your father's, they are yours. The cursed grant that lured me here is there too—keep it, but avenge me."

"I swear it."

As he answered he drew out a heavy roll of papers.

"Do not linger here. They might find you and slay you. Go, and remember to avenge me."

"Go, and leave you to die alone? Never! If this tale be true, I have sadly wronged you. Wait! Your wound may not be mortal."

He examined it with deft fingers; but shook his head gravely. Even now his uncle was dying. He spoke lower and with rapidly increasing difficulty.

A few more muttered words, a little clasp of hands, a groan or two, and Malcolm Dane was gone.

Then Dane Dorland straightened out the limbs of the dead, gave a last glance at the face of him whom he had hated with such deadly hatred and whom even now it was hard to forgive, and rushed out into the night. Down into the gulch he sped, with flying feet, and scarcely halted until he came to the stockade of the Go-down shaft.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRAIGHTENING UP OLD SCORES.

THERE was a light burning in the little cabin occupied by the two girls. In response to his knock Marion admitted him, and Dane Dorland was too much excited to notice that she too was deeply agitated.

He made no pause, but spoke:

"I have just come from the death of Malcolm Dane, Murray Brant's partner. He was my uncle, and he gave to me the papers in regard to this claim, which leaves your title clear. Here, take them. If I never come back they are yours. I go back to seek this Brant, who murdered my uncle, as he had murdered my father and mother before. When I find him, one of us dies. Of all the gang there are but two alive—he and the fiend who entered the camp to betray it—Burke, Geyser Joe, Blake! He too must die!"

The girl gave a great scream!

"No, no! It must not be! Listen!"

"I will not listen. He was the worst fiend of them all, for he crawled in to betray. This night, for the first time I discovered who he was, and he shall fall by my hand; I have sworn it."

"No, no!"

"Yes!" said a deep voice, and from behind a curtain of blankets that divided the little cabin, came Geyser Joe himself.

"Hyar I am, boy! Kill me whar I stand; I deserve it!"

He braced himself up for the shot, scarcely three steps off; and even while he spoke Dane Dorland's revolvers were out and leveled at him; but, with a great bound, Marion Blake threw herself upon his breast, with her arms clasped tightly around him.

"No! Not by your hands, *yours*! However he may have sinned he has repented. Slay him, if you dare, *he is my father*!"

"What?"

The hands that held the revolvers dropped to his sides.

"Your father?"

"Yes. I knew it not until to-night. I had not seen him since I was a child on his knee; but he has proved it beyond a doubt. He had to flee for his life, and my mother, with Charley and I left our home. He wrote to us but we got no letter. Afterward we received a little fortune from my uncle, and mother died, and Charley and I wandered here, and here he found me, and to-night has just told his story."

"She speaks the truth, but I don't ask no marcy, an' I won't lift a finger. I had no hand in the massaker, an' they told me ef I would go in thar wouldn't be any killin'. I shook 'em fur it an' they hate me like p'ison, but kill me all the same. I've no weapons on me an' I know the oath ver swore."

"No, no! Do not! If you ever cared for me—"

"Cared! Heavens! I have loved—but I have sworn!"

"No. By the memory of your love—of *our* love—spare!"

From her father she turned and flung herself upon Dane Dorland's breast, looking up into his face, with yearning eyes.

He caught her to him, printed one kiss on her brow, and exclaimed:

"In memory of that he shall live. Farewell!"

And out into the dark night he rushed, as though a horde of fiends were after him.

"He will keep his word!" said Marion, turn-

ing. "He will keep his word! You need fear trouble no longer. From him your life is safe."

"Not from me though!"

A hoarse, guttural voice resounded through the room, and with one bound there leaped through the window at Marion's back Red Bear, the Indian sport. Like a tiger he sprung upon Geyser Joe—or rather, Bill Blake—seized him, tore him from his feet, twisted him over his knee, held him there with the talons of his left hand sunk into his throat, while with his right hand he poised a gleaming knife over his heart.

"Red Bear look out for bad white man, kill him friend—kill him daughter's pappoose. Him friend Dandy Darke; keep him many moons; Mato-Mazo hear all; Dandy Darke no kill; Red Bear kill. Wa-hoop!"

It all passed like a flash. Marion gave a scream of alarm, but stood motionless, while her lately-discovered father found himself a very child in the nervous grip of the Indian. Though Dane Dorland might forgive, vengeance was close at hand.

But so was Lalaree.

When Marion was motionless with affright, she acted. From behind the curtain she rushed, and flung herself straight under the knife, with her arm twined around Red Bear under his up-lifted arm, and her face upturned to his.

"Stay!" she exclaimed. "I am your daughter's child, and this man has been a father to me. Of what he has done I have just heard the story!"

The Indian uttered an exclamation of surprise. He cast the knife from him, loosened his grip on Geyser Joe, and catching the girl in his arms, carried her to the light. With a searching eye he perused every lineament of her face, a broad gleam of conviction beginning to steal over his own.

"Yes. Lalaree has the eyes of Scarlet Dove, and the face of Silver Mouth, the great war-medicine of the whites. Red Bear's eyes have not been shut to Lalaree, but he could not believe. Now he does. He will never try to put a knife into the white man that saved his child. Shake!"

This sudden transition might have provoked a smile under other circumstances—under these it was accepted in thorough good faith by the man just staggering to his feet.

"I'll take it, sport; fur mebbe I deserve rough handlin' tho' I've done my level best fur ther leetle gal I dragged outer ther hands ov ther cussed gang I got in with. I turned sick that night, I did, and I saved that gal, an' thinkin' my own hed gone under, fur I'd kinder got word they was all burned on a Mississipp' steamer, I kinder 'dopted her. She brung me good luck, too; but when I thort I'd got a glimpse of a trail that might lead to my own, I dragged her 'round more than I orter. Ther blood told, tho', an' hyer she ar'! I've found my own darter, but es long es I've a dollar in ther ranch, you bet I'll look out fur Lalaree."

Geyser Joe told his story in a rough, off-hand way, but his hearers were all deeply affected. Though Red Bear maintained his stoicism fairly well, there were many questions to be asked and answered at this strange reunion, and some time

slipped away before the absent one was remembered.

"See hyer, Red Bear, you're an ole pard ov that boy's; you'd better look arter him a leetle. He's on a trail thet will lead him to trouble. Mebbe he wouldn't like to see me; but if you go you kin tell him how ther land lays, an' perhaps some day he'll be willin' to forgive me."

"Waugh! Joe talk straight, clear to the hub. Red Bear find Dandy Darke; back him up heap big; bring him back hunky-dunky! You bet! Go right along now. Waugh! Injun sport on the shoot 'way up. Sabbe? So long!"

And Red Bear went out into the darkness just as the sound of a distant shot fell on their ears.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUNG BY THE NECK.

WHEN Dane Dorland rushed out from the presence of the woman whom he now knew he loved more desperately than life itself, his brain was in a whirl, though through all the confusion of his thoughts there ran the thread of one settled purpose. He intended to kill Murray Brant.

Bitterly he cursed himself that, up to this time he had never recognized in him the leader of that gang of outlaws who had made the night onslaught on his father's camp, and whom his young mind, biased by the conversations he had overheard, had always believed had operated under the instruction of Malcolm Dane, who from that night had been a fugitive from remembrance and revenge as much as Dorland had ever been.

He left the stockade, and turned almost mechanically toward High Pine and went on up the dark road without taking much account of his surroundings.

The time had not yet come for work; then he would have a head clear enough for business. Now he was thinking more of the strange stories he had that night heard, and of the death of Malcolm Dane. His wits were wool-gathering.

He was destined to have them brought back very suddenly.

Up from behind the rock at his very back there rose a man, who threw himself suddenly upon him, pinning his arms down to his side with arms of steel, at the same time flinging himself backward upon the ground.

Even in this surprise, Dorland had a pistol out—but it was never raised. One barrel was harmlessly discharged, and it dropped from his grasp as a pair of very stout ankles were crossed over his, and Dane Dorland found himself clasped tightly in a human vise as unyielding as if of iron, from which there seemed no way of escape. What was the meaning of this attack he could not at once determine; but he had no doubt that his captor had confederates close at hand, though he had accomplished the work so far unaided.

There was not the least chance for a struggle of any kind, and when the man gave a low whistle, Dorland was certain that the rest of his foes, whoever they might be, would soon be upon him.

He was not mistaken. Others hastened up. He was securely bound, and then carried for

some distance by several men who cursed him heartily for being so heavy.

Then he was flung, face downward, upon the ground, while his captors stood around, evidently waiting for something, what or whom he knew not. He rolled over upon his back, and by the light of a fire smoldering against a rock, saw several men standing around.

"Hold on thar! You go floppin' about an' we'll drill yer. Jist lay still, my son."

"Drill and be hanged. Ye'r' just men enough for that kind of a dodge. You didn't dare give me a show, you infernal cowards, or I'd have been standing up, and two or three of you would have been lying down. Where's the man or men that will stand up against me with knife, fists or pistol?"

"Nowhar, Cap! I reckon we'll stand up ag'in' yer with a rope. Ef ye ever sees daylight ag'in call me a double-knuckled, four-legged, six-jawed liar! Now, keep yer clamshells shut till the boss comes, er we'll salivate yer with the butt-end of a carbine."

The man raised his weapon threateningly as he spoke and poised it over Dane Dorland's face. A single downward thrust of the heavy, iron-bound breech would mar the wild beauty of his face forever.

"Strike, and be hanged to you; but if you touch me, finish your work, for a day of settlement may come. Sooner or later I pay my debts in full."

"You crow loud fur a bantam," answered the man in a careless tone, "but I like to see pluck to the backbone. Take it out in swearin', an' cussed ef I'll strike yer, ef yer don't raise too high a racket. Don't git me inter trouble, tho'; fer the Cap'll let go lively, if things don't suit when he kims up."

There was a rude sort of admiration in the man's tones.

"Into whose hands have I fallen?" asked Dorland, noting at once the half-way sympathy.

"It's none of yer biz, youngster, but I'll tell yer, fur ye'll never hev a chance to carry it furdur. Ther Hawks of High Pine it ar' thet hes yer foul. Now dry up."

By a few easy words the man accomplished more than threat or force would have done. For ten minutes there was perfect silence, broken at last by a heavy tramp, tramp.

After a little Dane Dorland heard quite near to him the voices of two men engaged in conversation, and the story of his capture was explained.

"Ah!" said a voice, that he recognized as Murray Brant's; "that was excellent. Thomas is an invaluable man and will not be forgotten. As for this piece of carrion, there was no need to wait. When I first spoke to you about this affair I told you what I wanted to do with him. He has already killed half a dozen of my old friends, and he or I must die. Take the rope and hang him to a tree. That cursed pistol-shot may give the alarm; and, anyway, there is no time to waste."

"You'll take a squint at him to see, sure, it's the right man?"

"Yes."

Then Dane Dorland saw the squat figure of

Brant bending above him, holding a brand from the fire over his face.

"Ha, ha, youngster! Murray Brant seldom gives a man two chances. With you dead, the Go-down shaft pouring its treasures into my coffers, and the beautiful Marion in my power and solacing my weary hours with her rosy lips and loving glances, I think I can enjoy my temporary banishment, even in High Pine."

"Villain! outlaw! thief! murderer! For all your millions, your soul is black with past crime. Your hands are even now wet with the blood of the unhappy man whom you had pretended to make your partner! But Go-down shaft shall never be yours. I, Dane Dorland, in whom vests the title of that grant, the papers for which you forgot to secure, swear it. Marion Blake shall never be yours—there are those about her who would rather slay her where she stands! And I shall not die! I will live to trail you to your lair, and kill you in the hour of your triumph! I swear there is war to the knife between us! Now do your worst!"

At that moment a rope, flung by a steady hand, curled and writhed over a limb of a tree that hung suggestively near.

The noosed end of a rope dropped upon Dorland's face and breast, and lay there coiled and deadly like a snake.

"Gag the fool, and then take the rope and fit it to his neck and swing him up. I want to see him give one solid kick against nothing before I go. The men I brought down from High Pine are arrant cut-throats all. If I leave them five minutes, they'll go on and sack the shaft on their own hook. I hardly dare trust myself among them without a body-guard. Faith! I think they ran the Hawks out of High Pine because they were too fine for their company. Up with him!"

With teeth closed hard and eyes gleaming savagely, Dane Dorland felt the noose drawn around his neck. He neither winced nor uttered a prayer.

"Now!" said Brant, and he kicked savagely the bound and utterly helpless form. "Up with him. Good-night, Mr. Dorland. I'm off for Marion!"

And up Dane Dorland did go. No chance or hope of escape for him now. Murray Brant, followed by the outlaws, filed quietly out of the little glen where, straight and silent, they left him that had so long been known as Dandy Darke, hanging by the neck.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BRUTE'S MERCY AND THE RED SPORT'S GIFT.

HARDLY had the sounds of the retreating footsteps been lost in the night when the body of Dane Dorland came down with a sudden crash; Red Bear, the Indian Sport, leaped to his side, and cut the cords that bound mouth and hands and feet.

"Ugh! Dandy Darke good for dozen yet! No hang in half much time. Darke! eh? Leetle white face callin'? Wake up an' shoot. Here fire-water. Google, google! Drink um down; make um want hang forty time. Say."

While the Indian spoke in a low tone he busied

himself about the young man, who gave every symptom of speedily reviving.

"Come! white girl heap danger; no time fool here. Dandy Darke an' Red Sport go on shoot!"

He shook the shoulder of the gasping man, and then, as if unwilling to waste a moment, caught him up over his shoulder like a child and started out in the wake of Murray Brant and his gang of desperadoes.

Not for nothing had Murray Brant been quietly biding his time. Without a word to his partner, who, from the first, he had suspected would be lukewarm over the scheme, he had made his arrangements and gathered together from High Pine a trusty gang of recruits, while he had made arrangements with the cut-throats known as "The Hawks," who lurked without, some of whom by chance he had known in years gone by, to join him in the attack. They sought revenge on Geyser Joe, but he intended to use them also in his plot against the liberty of Marion. They came down upon the Go-down shaft like the tigers they were, stealthy, silent and savage. Without an alarm they won their way into the stockade at the expense of the life of a careless sentinel. Around the cabin when the men were sleeping gathered a dozen of the ruffians, each with a weapon cocked and poised, but lying low on the ground, so that those within could not see where to direct their shots.

Then, with a rush, Murray Brant, followed by three of the Hawks, flung himself upon the shanty where Marion and Lalaree lay, clasped in each other's arms, without a thought of danger.

With gloating eyes and nervous arms two strong men caught up the girls who, but a few moments before, had flung themselves down, dressed as they were.

"Hold her mouth shut," Murray Brant ordered, and then turned to Marion, as wild yells and the noise of several shots, and then a glare of fire arose without.

"I am accustomed to strike hard, my dear young lady, when I do strike. I offered you any accommodation, almost, and you refused. Now I take my own with usury. The little Indian girl who refused the suit of the mining millionaire, in Frisco, will be the plaything of the leader of the bandit Hawks of High Pine. As for you—your fate is still unsettled. I have yearned for you as I never yearned for any other woman, and it was only when I learned that you had set out for this delightful receptacle of human tigers that I decided to invest, with my friend, in Go-down shaft, as it is now called. We missed you on the way, for we took the lower trail; but at last I have you. This night you will disappear. It will rest with you whether your feet ever stray again outside of these mountain recesses. For a day or so the Hawks will be your guardians—they are old friends of mine—then I will seek you. Either you listen to reason or—you die. I hung your boy lover not ten minutes ago. I would hang you the same way rather than ever see you belong to another."

While he spoke the occupation of the camp seemed complete. In obedience to sharp orders, one after another the men came out of their cabin with hands uplifted, and casting

down their weapons passed sulkily on outside of the glare of the fire into the darkness that lay in one corner of the stockade, whither they were bidden retire.

"Now," continued Brant, turning to the men, "while they are busy with the men carry away the girls. I will see you started upon the way and then return to take possession, which is all the law that High Pine knows, when it is backed by force."

He strode out into the glare of the fire, following upon the heels of his men, and their burdens.

And then a wild shriek from the girls did not drown his harsh cry of:

"Ho there, High Piners! This way!"

He had caught sight of two forms bounding toward him, and he tugged at the weapon in his belt.

But his hand had lost its cunning. Before he could draw the pistol the drop was on him.

With a great leap the Red Sport—Scarlet Bear—with one mighty spring seized the two men by the throat. In either hand he held an outlaw, with a sickening, crushing grip. To the ground dropped the girls, while a step or two back, with a revolver in either hand, stood Dane Dorland, one barrel menacing Brant, the other leveled fair and square at the third outlaw.

And this barrel spoke without halt or warning, and down dropped the Hawk.

"At last!" shouted Dorland. "Villain, monster, murderer of my family, you die. A thousand tortures were none too good. It breaks my heart that I dare not save you for them. But you shall not escape, though I give you a chance for your life. Ah!"

A sharp report cut the air. Brant had barely drawn his pistol from its holder, when, turning the muzzle upward, he fired a line shot with it, held close by his side.

"He has hit me—but he dies!" exclaimed Dorland, and his weapon answered. Then he pitched heavily to the ground, Murray Brant falling at the same instant, with a hole drilled through the center of his forehead.

The sound of voices and shots struck upon the ears of the crowd at the other cabin. They came rushing up in a body, just in time to see their chief go down, and Scarlet Bear fling the two girls back into the shanty.

"Red Sport's 'round, wa-hoop!" he shouted, backing up to the wall and whipping out his pistols. "Cinnamon b'ars an' painters, but I'm ugly on er shoot. Wa-hoop!"

And the deadly rattle of his revolvers began, just as a voice in the rear yelled:

"Hyer's Geyser Joe on hand. Warp it to 'em, boyees! Hyer's fun at High Pine, an' not a soul saved!"

With a rush and a cheer Geyser Joe, followed by two or three men, opened fire. The surprisers were surprised. Murray Brant was down, the Hawks were down, more than one of the Tigers of High Pine had fallen before the rapid rain of shots, and with no one to lead them on, the rabble turned and fled. Once more the Go-down shaft was firmly settled in the hands of its proper owner.

But Marion Blake was kneeling by the side of motionless Dane Dorland, and the rain of her tears fell upon his marble face, while he heard not her wild voice, imploring him to come back to love and to her!

"Umph!" said Red Bear, close at her ear:—"Red sport big on the shoot; him all hunky dunky. Dandy Darke big on get well; him be all hunky dunky too, bime-bye, soon. White squaw waste tear; little red girl nurse him up then, an' Dandy Darke have big heart fur her. Eh? Go slow. Him comin' right now. Hunky dunky! Wa-hoop!"

With the air of an experienced surgeon, Red Sport had been examining Dorland. The bullet of Murray Brant's pistol had barely touched him, plowing its way along a rib that lay above the heart. It was the shock and the certainty when his own trigger had been pulled that his work was done, that had bereft him of consciousness. The Indian bore him into the shanty, and not long was it before his opening eyes looked full into those of Marion Blake, who was still bending over him with a world of concern pictured in her fair pale face.

No need is there here to go further into this history of Go-down shaft. Thus won, with three men like Dane Dorland, Geyser Joe and Scarlet Bear, the Red Sport, to hold it, the Tigers of High Pine might snarl in the distance and yearn to spring upon the quarry so temptingly near, but there were stout hands and hearts, and sure shooting weapons behind the little stockade, and even with a human tiger discretion is sometimes the better part of valor. But a hundred miles to the north, at the little mission church of Los Apostols, a certain white-haired old priest, whose life had been well spent in mission work, heard Dane Dorland's lips utter yet another vow. Only this time he gazed lovingly into the face of the beautiful Marion Blake, and this vow, as that other one, Scarlet Bear, once more a witness, though Lalaree was now by his side, knew that he would keep to the death.

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